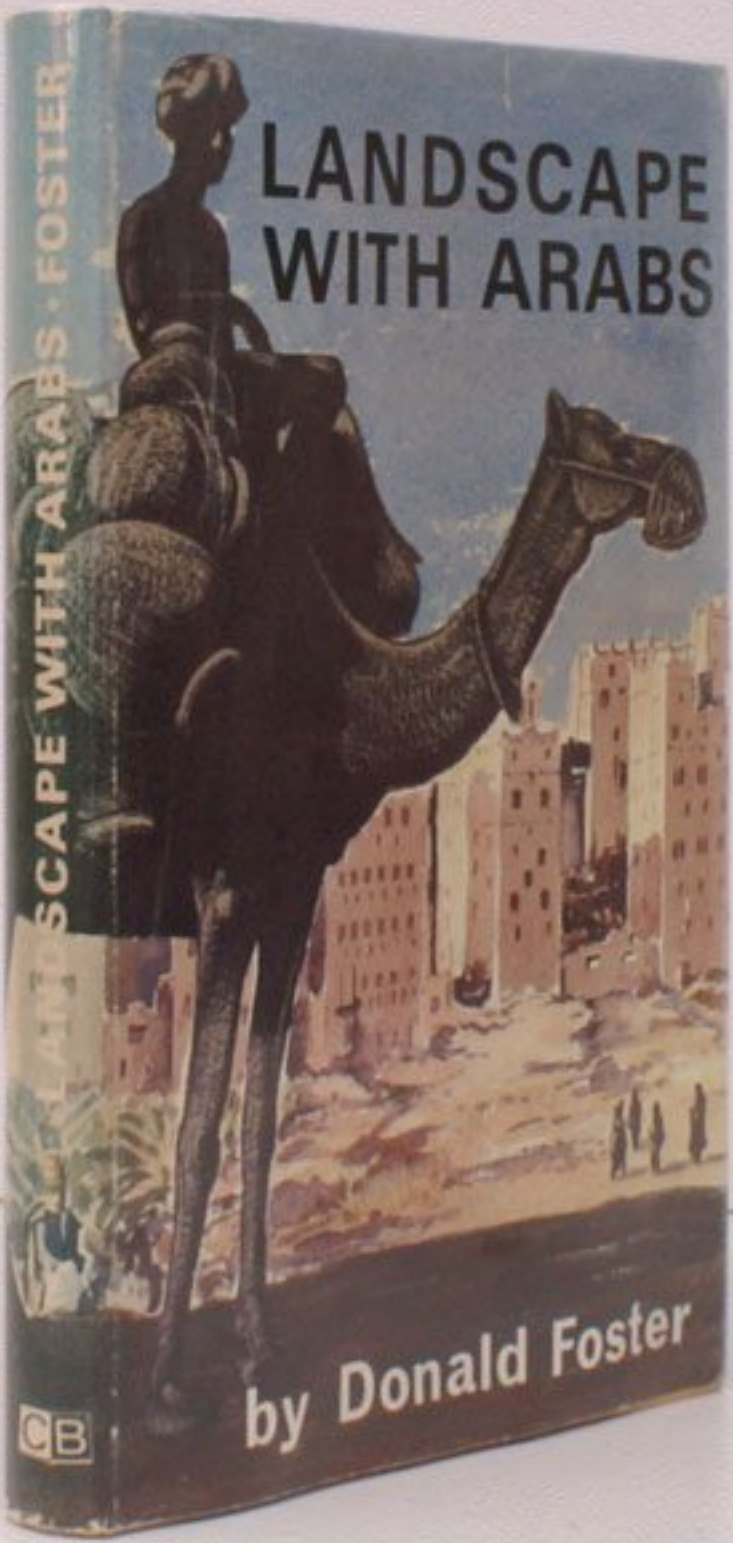
LANDSCAPE WITH ARABS
by Donald Foster
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LANDSCAPE WITH ARABS

Travels in Aden and South Arabia

DONALD FOSTER

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TO ELEANOR

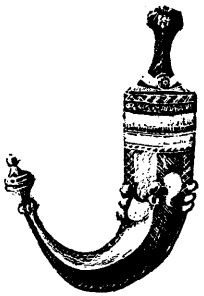
'The barren years, we have outlasted them,

The hungry years, we have outfasted them . . .'

ANON.

CONTENTS

		PAGE
	Prologue	9
I	Aden	13
II	Aden: the political background	25
III	Lahej	35
IV	Dhala	45
V	Kamaran	59
VI	The Interior: the political background	69
VII	Abyan	79
VIII	Hadhramaut	95
IX	The Yemen: the political background	109
X	Shuqra to Yeshbum	121
XI	Beihan	137
XII	The merger and after: threshold of independence ..	151
XIII	Aden again	163
XIV	Perim	179
	Epilogue	191
	Index	197



A South Arabian dagger

PROLOGUE

Towards the end of the Egyptian summer of 1945, the war being over, I embarked at Suez in the *Mooltan* to return to India. I had finished my war at a low ebb: for years I had been marooned in the remote wastes of Persia; the pursuit of a love-affair from Teheran to Cairo had come to grief and dust and ashes; I had contracted dysentery and septic prickly heat. The sick-bay of the *Mooltan* welcomed me, cool, aseptic, and cordoned by sea from the too-proximate Orient. The Middle East and I were parting on bad terms: I wished never to see it again.

At Aden the kindly English nurse came alongside my bunk with mid-morning Bovril. 'You may go ashore if you wish. There's a special launch for the halt and the lame.' I raised myself to peer from the scuttle into a blinding brightness; there was an uncouth shouting where bum-boats lay alongside, trading with the soldiers. An oily sea was flecked with orange-peel and bread-rolls over which gulls squawked and squabbled. Across the greasy water stony screes, like slag-heaps, sloped drably to a grey-cloud summit; at the water's

There is little of politics: South Arabian politics are local, ephemeral and changing at kaleidoscopic speed. Anyone who claims to understand the political situation in South Arabia has probably been misinformed! The territory was under British control, in varying forms, throughout the period. Independence came in November 1967.

As a medium for mixing my colours I have used a dash of personal experience, partly for interest and also to lend to this otherwise lightweight book its due authority. So many Middle East books are by travellers or professional writers or other birds of passage: my modest claim is that I lived and worked there for many years, closely involved with the day-to-day business of government. Like anyone thus committed, I am left with few illusions. It is tiresome to read starry-eyed accounts of South Arabia by persons who, from the brevity of their sojourn there, have not been obliged to work in a harsh climate, in a country devoid of all development potential, frustrating, poor, ugly, and to sustain relationships with the local people, as I had to do, for close on fifteen years. The journeys here described as single occasions are in most cases the compound product of many journeys, made over many years but run together in narrative as a convenient literary device.

The Aidrus mosque, Aden

CHAPTER I

ADEN

Kipling described it as a burnt-out barrack stove, and people were saying unkind things about Aden long before he did. His simile is apt: there is a clinker-like deadness, a gnarled fire-compacted burnt-out quality about the barren rock. But Kipling was not charitable. For all the hard things that may be said about Aden there is no denying the dramatic impact of a first sight of it. Out of an ocean-dark sea it towers suddenly, seventeen hundred feet of naked rock, sharply conical to the peak of Shamsan. In a sea approach the curve of the sea horizon will at first conceal the buildings which circle the base of the mountain, so that it shows menacingly stark and unpeopled.

Depending upon the time of day, the colour will change: Aden rock, as though to compensate for its uncompromising sterility, takes colour from the sun as greedily as an opal. Fluted ridges, plunging rock-faces, ravines and pinnacles, are cobalt and ultramarine in morning light, grape-blue and grey under monsoon cloud, glowing at sunset with vermilion and crimson, magenta-shadowed;

there are no local artifacts, no craft-goods; the staples are cameras, watches, radios, record-players, binoculars, perfumes, projectors. Being duty-free these luxury consumer-goods are fantastically cheap compared with Europe: a camera costing £156 in England is sold in Aden at £65. There is the universal orientala – Indian brassware and Kashmir trays, Hong Kong silks and brocades, Japanese transistors, bogus camel-saddles and unwearable shawls.

Except during siesta hours the Crescent is always busy, and when the yellow funnels of one of the big liners, *Canberra* or *Oriana* or *Gripsholm*, tower over the street at Abkari Pier the pavements are jammed with ships' passengers. During five years at the Secretariat, opposite the landing stage, I observed them closely. It made an agreeable diversion from drafting memoranda to gaze through the slatted jalousies at the shuffling crowds of newly decanted tourists. With practice I could distinguish their nationality, their class and whether they were outward bound or homeward: *mittel*-European emigrants in *lederhosen* and lumberjacket shirts, extraordinarily uninhibited; dark, handsome Italians, taking it all in their stride; British emigrants, curiously insular and self-conscious for all that the Union Jack flapped languidly in the hot wind, tending to be redly sunburnt and their children pimply.

Away from the gimcrack shops there is little of interest; the barren slopes rise abruptly from behind the Crescent, frayed with a suburb of shanties crazily constructed of old packing cases and kerosene tins, where live the poor. These shanty-towns burgeon on any piece of waste ground, the constant housing shortage aggravated by a continual drift of Yemenis across the open frontier. The landing stage, the Government Secretariat, the shops and gardens, a parade ground, and some pompous waterfront buildings – P. & O. House, the Navy's stone frigate H.M.S. *Sheba*, B.P. House and the U.S. Consulate. After these, Steamer Point peters out in a dereliction of oil jetties and abandoned coal-wharves. The road winds past oil tanks and humps over Hedjuff into Maalla; from the rise, a cutting through red-ochre rock, the road stretches ruler-straight between a canyon of concrete flats. There is a distant impression of clean white modernity, but a closer look reveals a squalor of the poorest speculative building, tricked out with all the architectural clichés of the fifties – *brise-soleil* and angled balconies, coloured tiles

romantic appearance they are workaday ships, carrying humdrum cargoes up and down the Arabian coast, south to Africa and north to the Persian Gulf, coast-hugging from Karachi or up the long hot reefs of the Red Sea. Any cargo may be aboard: Persian carpets and dates and kerosene and engine-spares and Japanese tinned tuna and Italian tomato puree and salt and soda and sardines. They have survived the coming of steam-ships, their size and relative cheapness making them still an economic form of transport. Auxiliary engines have given them a new lease of life, facilitating the entering and leaving of harbours and ensuring against dead calms. Long may they flourish!

For all that much of its commerce is humdrum, Aden yet handles cargoes with authentically oriental flavours. The most typical is perhaps coffee, for from South Arabia first came the famous Mokha coffee, grown in the highlands of the Yemen and exported through that port. It is still big business, but most now comes from Abyssinia. There is the gum trade, providing the most historic of gifts – frankincense and myrrh – as well as gum arabic, copal benjamin and resin from Africa and Dhofar, shipped out through Berbera, Shihr and Mukalla, and still in demand. There are coral and ivory and pearls, opium and shark fins (for soup), cowries, hides, skins, mother-of-pearl and tortoise-shell. None is truly a local product. There is cotton from Abyan and Lahej, but Aden is a mart, not a factory, a dealer and not a producer.

From Maalla the road makes a loop about the Muslim graveyards and climbs the scree sloping from the outer wall of the Crater. Here is Main Pass, the entrance into the Crater through a deep cleft in the rock, where may best be seen the surprising colour range of Aden's rock, ochre and Indian red and pale madder and green. The texture varies – crystals of Anjite, lavas resembling coarse sponge, pumice, obsidian, chalcedony, and gypsum; the late afternoon sun exaggerates them to astonishing vividness. Above the Pass are old fortifications dating from the mid 19th century, bastions and turrets and embrasures and curtain-walls – intact, since they were never put to the test of assault.

The gut of the Pass is short, barely a hundred yards between the high cliffs before the road emerges into the Crater. Turning sharply into a side valley, a cul-de-sac between stark and ugly cliffs, crammed

far from being a storm-tossed victim of the seas, plundered on a hostile coast, she was deliberately run ashore by her supercargo for the insurance money, she being over-insured and he having arranged with the Sultan to share the loot. Haines arrived on the scene in April, following the looting in January 1837. He was an officer long experienced on the Arabian coast, where a survey squadron of the Indian Marine had cruised for six years. Haines had long recommended Aden as a potential British possession and had reported to the Bombay government, urging its advantages as a commercial and coaling port. In principle his recommendations were accepted, since that Government had an interest in the security of the Arabian coast, where Indian merchants had traded for centuries. Moreover, Bombay had an interest in facilitating and developing the overland route to India, by land across the isthmus of Suez and thence by the Red Sea – on which Aden would form a staging post – since, as the terminal of this vital service, Bombay would have the advantage over her rival Calcutta. Bombay resolved that any further misbehaviour by the Sultan of Lahej should be used to justify an occupation of Aden.

The plunder of the *Doria Dowlut* was the very incident to serve the purpose, and here on the spot was Haines, that Aden enthusiast, to look into the matter, which he did – until 1839. By that time Haines's patience, with that of his supporters in Bombay, was drawing to an end. He was reinforced by H.M. Steamer *Volage*, 28 guns, and *Cruizer*, 10 guns, with 700 men, 400 sepoys and 300 Europeans, under a Major Baillie of the Honourable Company's Army.

As an opener, Aden was bombarded by ships' guns, and the terrain was such that this was effective. Shore batteries, well served by Egyptians who may have been deserters from Mohammed Ali's army, replied to the bombardment but with little effect; by 16th January they were silenced, and the troops stormed ashore under a heavy covering fire. Resistance was slight and in a few hours all was over. British casualties were 15 and Arab 150. It was the first acquisition of territory of the young Queen Victoria.

If the capture lacked drama, Haines's subsequent career had elements of tragedy in a squalid and petty fashion characteristic of Aden. He was the first Political Resident, occupying the simple house in Khusaf Valley for seventeen years – the long tours of duty

squatters, animals, parked cars, awnings, and the casual overflow on to the pavement of shops, goods, shopkeepers and customers. Here and there through the squalid mess show ineffectual attempts at organization: the central market is bravely 'contemporary', but street trading has encroached and the effect of the new building is lost. From this central clearing radiate narrow and crowded streets – one of goldsmiths, Indians all, where rings and necklets and bangles are sold by weight of gold; one of cloth merchants, displaying stuffs of Japan and India and Lancashire as well as handsome brocades; a third, where the reek of drains is particularly offensive, leads past the gutted Jewish school, scene of the worst outrages in riots against the Jewish community in 1947.

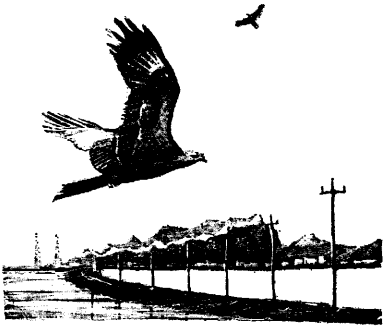
Many Jews left Aden for Israel then and only a small number remain. The Jews of Aden were a most anciently established community – Kipling writes in 'The Mother Lodge' of 'Saul the Aden Jew' – and they provided many of the artisan skills. Their European role of moneylender was unknown here, and is an Indian preserve.

At the edge of the town, under the cliffs, you will arrive at the site of the Tanks, Aden's sole major antiquity. As a tourist spectacle they are the grossest anti-climax and I pity the tourists waylaid at Steamer Point by touts urging a visit to 'the famous Tanks, the Queen of Sheba's baths.' (They will also be told that Cain is buried in the Main Pass cemetery and that Noah's Ark was built in the Maalla dhowyards.) The alleged mystery of the Tanks, and that a dull one, is who built them and when. There is archaeological doubt, but probably they were constructed at about the time of the second Persian invasion of the Yemen around A.D. 600. These tanks are neither more nor less than ancient stone-and-cement reservoirs, in a gorge which cleaves the sheer face of the Crater. They are linked and surrounded by footpaths and little stepped bridges, running back for a hundred yards into the gorge; pigeons clatter among the rocks and grey swifts swoop to the surface of the stagnant dregs lying scummily at the bottom.

Among the crowded streets of three- and four-storeyed houses is a number of mosques, none remarkable except the surviving minaret of a now vanished building beside the General Post Office, shallowly pargeted and slightly tapering, said to have been built by a woman ruler of the Yemen in the 14th or 15th century of the Christian era.

capture. Here too is the municipal swimming-pool, a great innovation when it was opened in 1955, for the Arabs had not made use of the excellent coves to take up the sport of swimming. One afternoon a week at the pool was set aside as 'purdah day', when the Arab ladies could disport themselves in unaccustomed *al fresco* freedom. On the first afternoon the adjacent rocky hillsides which overlooked the pool were black with male spectators! A Long Range Desert Snoop at Other Men's Flowers.

Beyond Holkat Bay the road snakes up the stony side of Ras Marshag, where derelict gun emplacements clutter the cliff top and a stumpy white lighthouse overlooks a great expanse of sea. From here you command the eastern approaches to Aden and perceive the sea routes diverging from the Aden bottleneck – tankers for the Persian Gulf, P. & O. liners for Bombay and Australia, streamlined Lloyd Triestinos for Mogadishu, head to starboard for a landfall at Cape Guardafui. South is the inaccessible seaward face of Aden. From here you may go no further; the cliffs plunge from the rim of the Crater, fifteen hundred feet, red, stark and bare, into the sweating and sullen sea, in its staggering inhospitality a setting worthy of saga or legend. But there is none of any interest.



A Brahmini kite over the Causeway

CHAPTER II

ADEN

The Political Background

My aim and hope in writing this book is to convey the visual impact of the Arabian scene, and I concede only reluctantly that some account of its political history is necessary if the landscape is to be related to its environment. This and three later chapters therefore give a brief account of the political history of the region – Aden, the Protectorate, relations with the Yemen, and the situation on the eve of independence. It is the merest sketch, for the general reader and not the specialist, a frame to a landscape, not an archive for reference.

A common failing among the British in Aden is to talk as though its history began with the Dublin Fusiliers wading ashore in 1839, that is, with British Aden, rather as they tend to teach the history of their own island as beginning in 1066. As far as the British are concerned, this is of no great importance – nations may teach themselves their own histories in whatever form they find most palatable – but in the case of overseas possessions it is a deplorable arrogance to ignore the centuries preceding the arrival of the colonial powers. To double-insure therefore against the potential criticism of failing to trace to the very roots of history we will begin at the Book of Genesis.

> Haran, and Canneh, and Eden the merchants of Sheba, Asshur, and Chilmad, were thy merchants.
>
> These were thy merchants in all sorts of things, in blue clothes, and broidered work, and in chests of rich apparel, bound with cords, and made of cedar, among thy merchandise.

Sheba we have already met; Canneh, or Qana, mentioned by Ptolemy, Pliny, and the author of that remarkable set of antique sailing directions, the Periplus of the Erythrean Sea, is identified provisionally with the little Wahidi fishing village of Bir Ali; while in the context it is not unreasonable to identify 'Eden' with Aden. The 'blue clothes' could be a reference to the indigo-stained robes still worn by the tribesmen.

These small commercial kingdoms of South Arabia went into decline before the Christian era, and although their repute for wealth was sufficient to attract the greed of Imperial Rome, which in 24 B.C. sent Aelius Gallus and a legion marching through the desert to lay hold on them, he found nothing but impoverished and thirsty lands and, like the Grand Old Duke of York, marched away again. One hundred and forty years later, in A.D. 120, is on record the destruction of the great dam at Marib, capital of Sheba, which may not have been a single disaster but one which, by its timing, became in folklore symbolic of the decline and eventual ruin that had come upon the region.

Christianity came to the south before Islam, in A.D. 342, when an embassy of the Emperor Constantius built churches there. There was an Abyssinian invasion of the Yemen – and until recent times Aden and much of the south were part of the Yemen – followed by a Persian conquest. After the rise of Islam, Persian viceroys were conquered in turn by Arab armies from the north. Succeeding centuries are obscure, and it is not until A.D. 1038 that for a short time the mists clear to reveal one Ibn Omar, chief of Lahej, who captured Aden from its Yemeni governor, put him to death, and established a dynasty which endured for a century. The next four hundred years are also obscure; there is no clear record or significant pattern until the Europeans appear. First were the Portuguese, in 1503, followed in 1513 by the great Albuquerque, who on Easter Eve made a determined assault on Aden, complete with scaling ladders, but who retired defeated after four days of battle and much slaughter,

many countries of, say, Eastern Europe and the people more free. An Aden Settlement Board was set up, with members nominated by the Governor, also a Port Trust, and by 1931 both bodies included representatives of the Arab community. It must be borne in mind that until very recently the proportion of Indians in the population was large – nearly one half in the 1870s – and, as a result of their commercial acumen, frugality and hard work, they were disproportionately influential. They dominated the civil service, commerce and public affairs and it was not easy to persuade, or to obtain, suitable Arab candidates for public duties such as the membership of these Boards and Trusts.

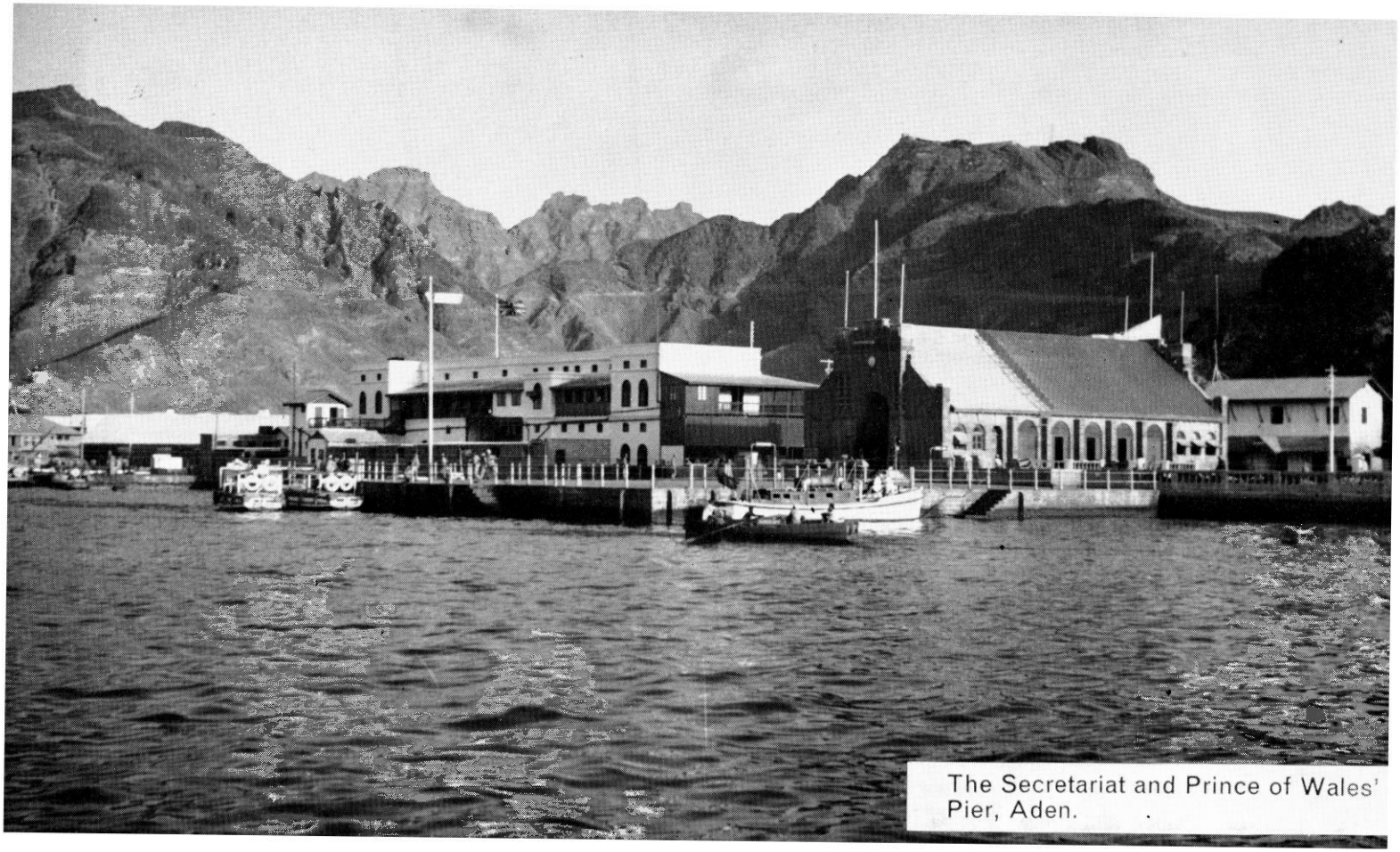
Political developments in India during the thirties disturbed this tranquil if sterile pattern. Provincial autonomy for Bombay would create difficulties: the Arabs would object to being governed by Bombay Indians while the British could not view with equanimity the passing from their control of this strategically valuable staging post on the route to the East. To avoid this, Aden in 1932 was removed from its position satellite to Bombay and made a Chief Commissioner's province, directly responsible to the central government at Delhi; but events were moving to make this no more than a temporary expedient. The passing of the Government of India Act of 1935, with provincial autonomy and the inevitability of ultimate independence, made it necessary once more to ensure that Aden remained in British hands and in 1937 it was transferred from India to the Colonial Office, and became a Crown Colony.

Aden now had a Governor, with powers only slightly qualified by the statutory requirement that he be assisted by an Executive Council or Cabinet. By 1947 the well-established Colonial Office formula of a Legislative Council had been introduced. The Government retained full control since the Council was at first not elected but composed of officials who occupied their Council places by virtue of their appointments, other officials who were nominated to the Council by the Governor in regard to their personal qualities, and a similar group of nominated 'unofficials', that is, private persons chosen for their representative standing or status in the community, locally prestigious bankers, company managers, shipping and oil men. The Council was at first exclusively British.

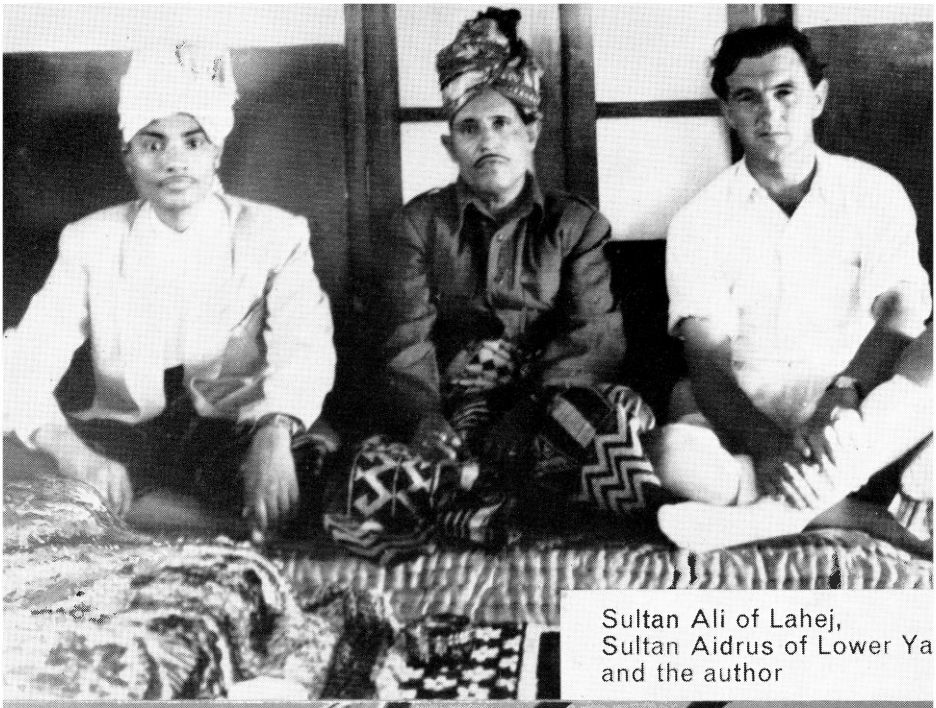
administration, and displayed a fitting sense of responsibility and duty. They were, of course, chosen from among the moderates in the Legislative Council. I saw quite a lot of them since I was at that time Clerk, that is, Secretary, to the Executive Council and at the weekly Government House meetings sat discreetly at a small table beside the Governor, taking notes.

Abdullah Saidi looked after Education, a jolly plump man and that rare Arabian bird, a drinker of hard liquor who made no attempt to conceal his indulgence and with whom I would frequently enjoy a beer at the Airport Bar. Abdullah Basendwah grappled with the large medical and health services. Joshi, who had Public Works, was an ascetic Hindu lawyer, a very pillar of British nineteenth-century Liberalism, incorruptible, maddeningly righteous, personally charming. He was an unusual choice for an Arab electorate but commanded the support of the substantial enfranchised cadre of Aden Indians. His election would not occur today, when racialist feelings are higher, but his motives were utterly disinterested since, on his appointment as Minister, he was required to give up his successful legal practice for the modest Ministerial salary. Posts and Telegraphs were in the hands of Ali Salem bin Ali Abdo, the quick and likeable son of a prosperous transport contractor, while at Labour, a delicate appointment in strike-prone Aden, was Hassan Ali Bayoomi. He was the figure most powerful politically and later became the Chief Minister who was to lead Aden to join in the Federation. Tragically, both he and the jolly Saidi died recently, at a time when Aden sorely needs their services. But I doubt if their brand of moderation would have ridden out the storms now racking South Arabia.

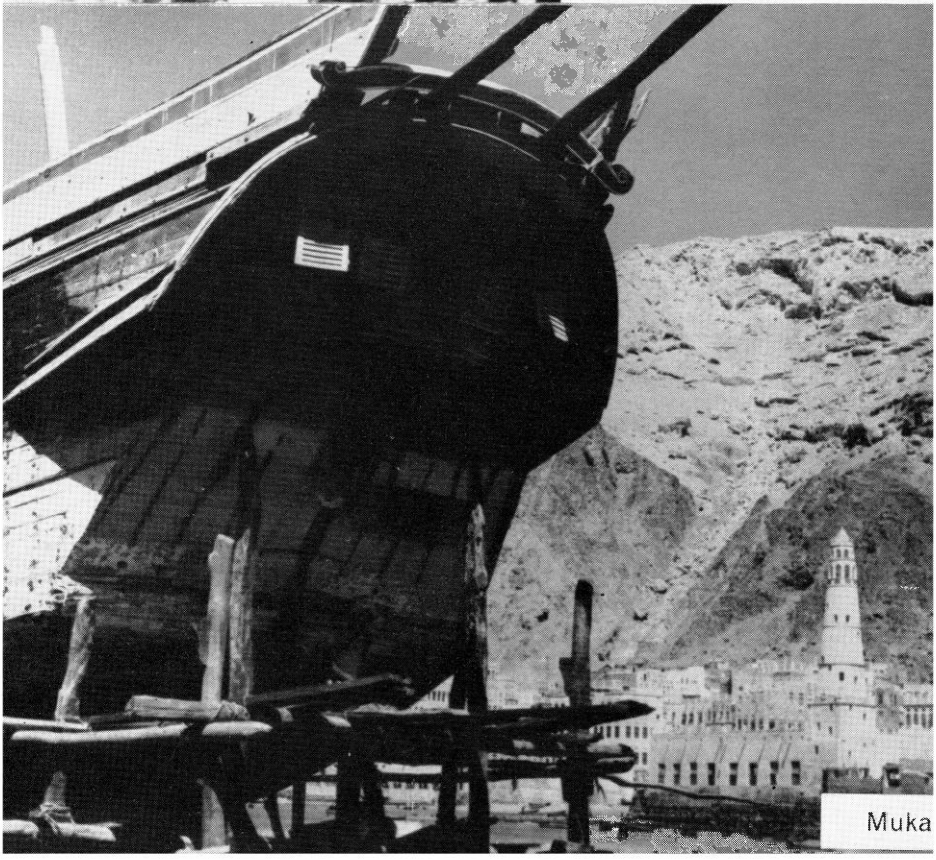
The elections required for the newly constituted Legislative Council provoked contention, the Aden Trades Union Congress, a nationalist body led by Abdullah Asnag, urging a boycott on the ostensible grounds that the franchise was illiberal, i.e. it excluded the large Yemeni labouring population whose support would have voted the trade unionists into power. The boycott was partly successful, but despite threats and some violence, the elections were held and the result was a victory for moderates and independents – not surprisingly since Government's extensive techniques of inducement had been deployed to that end. The moderates then grouped under the



The Secretariat and Prince of Wales' Pier, Aden.



Sultan Ali of Lahej,
Sultan Aidrus of Lower Ya
and the author



Muka

contentment, resulted in political stagnation. During the thirties, while Cairo and Lahore rioted, Aden slumbered. It was only after the Second World War, which scarcely touched Aden, that there was a dawning of consciousness of Aden's neglected role on the Arab stage. Its first public performance was a sorry spectacle, the vicious anti-Jewish riots of 1947. From 1952 onwards the pace quickened, stimulated by the example and activities of Nasser's Egypt. Anywhere in the Arab world Egypt has ever been a focus, and its effect has been felt immeasurably more strongly with the wider impact of radio. Cairo's propaganda machine was, and is, efficient while the new cheap transistor radios are available to even the poorest Arab, so that the Nasser line is heard around the clock and around the Arabian Peninsula. The effect of radio propaganda on untutored minds, accustomed to the spoken word and the oral tradition of unlettered societies, is immense. Thus from 1952 Aden became increasingly conscious that it was the last Arab territory to remain under British rule, and, except for Algeria and Tunis, the last colonial territory in Arab lands.

The unrest which has transformed Aden from a placid, poor, dependent territory to a trouble-torn country has thrown up no distinctive political parties of any size or permanence. No national figure has emerged to lead the country. The politicians acceptable to the British during the 1950s and 1960s were never capable of rousing more than small personal followings, as ephemeral in their groupings as footprints in the sand. Bayoomi and Saidi are dead, Joshi retired to India, Baharoon, a moderate who reluctantly became Chief Minister on Bayoomi's death, returned thankfully to his business after a short and uncomfortable period of office.

But before independence could come to this small territory, which in other circumstances might have hoped for it on the lines of Singapore, it found itself embarrassed by trouble from a quarter of which, during the British regime, it had remained largely in ignorance – its own hinterland, the terrible, tribal, sultan-haunted hills of the Aden Protectorate.

Wadi Hardaba (Radfan)

CHAPTER III

LAHEJ

Of the seven hundred passengers who, on average, landed each day at Aden hungry for cameras, wrist-watches and other duty-free luxuries, probably not more than a dozen paused to glance at the walls of the arcaded hall through which they passed on disembarkation. Those who did, and who had a taste for the flavour of days long past, were rewarded by a sight of panels, lists of names and regiments in embossed bronze. If their visit coincided with Remembrance Sunday in November, they were detained for a moment or two by a smart red-turbanned policeman while within the hallway a modest ceremony took place. In front of a thin half-circle of middle-aged gentlemen, faintly embarrassed, behind clasps of medals, the High Commissioner placed a poppy-wreath under one of the plaques, while another red-turban blew on a burnished bugle the sharp-edged poignancy of 'Last Post'. It was the Aden branch of the British Legion paying its respects to the dead of the two wars. For the hallway is Aden's war memorial, and it is perhaps characteristic of this bleak and inept territory that it should welcome its visitors by having them run a gauntlet of unhappy memories.

In the case of Aden's part in the First War, the names of whose casualties relieve the stone walls of the hallway, the memory could scarcely be less felicitous, not on account of the numbers there listed, but because most of these unfortunates lost their lives in a single action which for fatuity equals anything on the Western Front. Most were killed on the road to Lahej.

Lahej lies fifteen miles north-west of Aden, and the tarmac which now leads thither was one of my last achievements, when I had a responsibility for road-making and the like, in the Federal Ministry of the Interior. But tarmac or not, Lahej has always been accessible from Aden, even by motor-car, for the satisfyingly stark stretch of desert which must be crossed provides fair going for much of the way. One leaves Aden by the causeway, skirts hastily through the squalor of Sheikh Othman and the scumble of shanties that is the border hamlet of Dar al Amir, and heads across tawny sand and gravel towards dark rock mountains in attractive groupings, with high yellow sand banked against their cliffs. I recommend the journey to camera-travellers. Photographs may be taken on the Lahej road which suggests the ultimate in deserts, with sand-dunes, camel caravans and receding vistas of sweet damn-all while your taxi waits, out of range of the view-finder, on the tarmac.

It was here, on this brief but very desert desert, in characteristically farcical tragedy, that the First World War was fought in South Arabia. It had nothing of the drama of the Western Front, the sweep of Allenby in Palestine, or even the incompetent horrors of Mesopotamia. It was typical of South Arabia: trivial, inept, colourless, unsuccessful, and totally without effect on wider issues. In 1915, under the gallant Circassian Ali Said Pasha, the Turks advanced from the Yemen, where they had ruled as conquerors since 1872. They had no trouble with the Haushabi, who joined forces with them, and advanced through Nobat Dukeim to Lahej. The British reaction was, to say the least of it, sluggish, but a force finally assembled at Sheikh Othman and set off across the desert. No record seems to exist of this disastrous venture, and it is easy to see why those responsible would wish to leave it unchronicled.

There were delays, the troops did not set out until the July sun

was high, at the hottest time of the year. Before them the bare and sandy wastes stretched, shimmering with mirage, into a dusty haze. Shortly after leaving Sheikh Othman the camels carrying the water supplies ran away, owing to the cowardice or treachery of the drivers, so that the troops were waterless. Many died of heat exhaustion, and their number would have been greater but for the British civilians of Aden who, with unusual enterprise, bought up the entire commercial supply of ice and sent it after the men in private cars. Many stuck in the sand, but were still able to serve their purpose since numbers of the wretched soldiers, unable to go forward, turned back and met these life-saving vehicles before the limits of their endurance had been reached.

Those who arrived at Lahej were hastily organized for its defence, although they were in a poor state. To add to their wretchedness, with one of those freaks of climate not uncommon here, it rained hard during the night, turning the desert to mud and making them wet and uncomfortable in their thin uniforms. Moving forward at daybreak to the northern fringes of the oasis where the Turks were expected to appear, they encountered the Sultan of Lahej riding back to bring news from Nobat Dukeim and to hurry the badly delayed British aid for which he had appealed. The meeting was disastrous because, unrecognized, he was taken for an enemy and shot, dying at Aden within a few days. Thus the British lost the principal friendly ruler in the Protectorate.

Disheartened by this further blow, the troops retired to Sheikh Othman without having seen the enemy, who followed them and occupied Sheikh Othman, the northern shore of the harbour, and even the Little Aden peninsula.

At this point in the undistinguished campaign, a typical South Arabian inertia crept over operations. Sir Ronald Storrs called in April 1917 and found disagreement between General Stewart and his political adviser, Colonel Jacob, the latter urging the expulsion of the Turks, the former declining. Storrs hurried on to more exciting theatres of war, and the stalemate might have continued until 1918 but for the advocacy of the members of the Khormaksar Golf Club. It was their importunity which started the fighting again, because as things stood the golf course lay dangerously within range of the shooting, thus preventing play. Clearly this state of affairs

could not be tolerated and after receiving a delegation of the club committee the general was induced to drive the Turks out of Sheikh Othman. After this burst of energy the Aden front remained undisturbed until the Armistice, with camel trains passing between the lines without let or hindrance. It would have been unprofitable for the Turks to stop this traffic since they levied tolls, while the British permitted the outward flow of goods so that friends in the interior could get essential supplies. The entire episode was very South Arabian – the disastrous march, the shooting of the friendly sultan, the retreat to Khormaksar and, to welcome the visitor, the names of the dead.

Approaching Lahej you will leave the desert and come to dusty fields, yellow-flowering acacias twittering with weaver birds, and walking haystacks which reveal themselves as fodder-laden camels in nose-to-tail strings. Thin white bullocks drag wooden ploughs through the earth, while dark-skinned women stoop, in shapeless shifts, to weed and hoe and plant and pick, according to the season. The road is lined and shaded with acacias, the fields punctuated with date palms. Outside the town is the state hospital which, after the new building was erected, ran out of funds for equipment. In an attempt to prise aid from a visiting United Nations expert, the hitherto-unused hospital was put into temporary commission, to display to him the acute shortage of essentials. Doctors were assembled from clinics, half-empty bottles of drugs were disposed about the cupboards, patient-charts were hastily faked. At the last moment it occured to the organizers that even an under-equipped hospital ought to display a patient or two, so the highways and byways of the town were searched and half a dozen healthy peasants were hustled, greatly to their surprise, into bed! The ruse was successful, and the hospital now functions full-time, with genuine patients.

I never arrive in Lahej, whether down the long and stony drive from Dhala or across the new tarmac from Sheikh Othman, without recalling T. S. Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi', in which his travellers complain of

'the camelmen cursing and grumbling . . .
and the villages dirty and charging high prices . . . .'

I find it an unattractive and unfriendly town. The main street has

been tarmacked but the buildings, of two or three storeys, are of unburnt mud brick, totally undistinguished. With Farouzh, a charming Armenian surveyor whom I have known for many years, I recently tramped about Lahej in a conscientious effort to discover something of interest, and, like Eliot's Magi, 'a hard time we had of it'.

By mischance we had chosen a 'bad day' – of which there are many in these parts. Although it was the cool season, the wind had risen and dust swirled everywhere, gritting into eyes and hair and ears. We scuffled, heads bent against the dust and swirling scraps of paper, straw, cigarette packets and other filth, across the parade ground in front of the palace, behind a high wall, above which showed trees and climbing plants, bougainvillea and jasmine. I knew the palace of old, with its unfocused grandeurs of Italian furniture and uncertain plumbing. The most remarkable and agreeable feature of the palace is the excellent fruit drinks there served – fresh lime-juice, scented, clean, immensely refreshing, and the juice of water-melons. It is furnished in the European manner, and a great deal of money has clearly been spent on it from time to time. I have sat through tribal receptions, while the unimpressive baronry of Lahej and its fragile satrapies came forward to pay respects, kissing hand and knee of their ruler; and religious occasions, listening for long hours to recitations from the Holy Quran in the mannered enunciations of professional scripture readers, incomprehensible to the Arabic-speaking foreigner, so affected is the utterance.

If the vassals were a threadbare lot, the members of the sultanic family were very well dressed in a style as unique as it is distinguished. The Indian influence remains pronounced. The sultans wear an Indian-style button-up frock coat with a high stand-up collar in some plain material, black or white or buff, but unlike many Indian statesmen they keep the collar neatly hooked. Beneath the full-skirted coat are worn trousers of narrow cut, while over it, like an academic robe, is the *abba* or cloak of Northern Arabia, of fine fabric, with full half-length sleeves, piped in gold thread. Turbans are of multi-coloured silk, neatly wound. Ramshackle their rule may be, and limited their powers, yet, like the French aristocracy on the eve of the Revolution, they are immaculately turned out and certainly dress the part of sultans.

At the police post at the end of the bazaar the tarmac ends

abruptly – an extension is planned – and with Farouzh I drove over a rutted and pot-holed surface through a long avenue of acacias. Donkeys, camels, landrovers and even motor-bicycles, operating as pillion-seat taxis, with yokes of small bony cattle and piebald flocks of goats, made the traffic reminiscent of Kim's Grand Trunk Road, while the mud villages set among dark mango trees and date palms had for me a nostalgic flavour of the Punjab. After a mile or two there is a notably attractive avenue of *beidan* trees, the pale-trunked Indian almond with leaves of red and russet and green, through which we passed to reach the Husseini Gardens.

Here, as everywhere in this stark land where water brings greenery, may be seen a great variety of birds. The desert and the mountains offer only the vultures and hawks and sand-coloured larks, but where there is a hint of vegetation a profusion of vivid bird-life comes to notice. Weaver-finches, yellow as mustard, fluttered about their hanging nests; black-headed bulbuls piped their liquid notes and turtle-doves cooed among the orange trees. Our picnics attracted those great scavengers the crows, grey-hooded and impudent, stalking as close as they dared, squawking and squabbling over scraps of sandwich. Regrettably, there is no well-illustrated and compact book on Arabian birds, but most species can be identified from books on East African birds, which, by contrast, are numerous. I am no bird-watcher, merely an interested layman, but it has been my good fortune to see and identify two unusual birds: an Amethyst Starling in a garden at Maalla, and a Klaas's Cuckoo at Khormaksar.

The Amethyst Starling is a bird of quite heavenly colouring, a genuine amethyst blue-mauve, not at all like a starling but more like a large swallow: it is rare in Aden, although more common in the Yemen Highlands. The Klaas's Cuckoo was also a handsome fellow, sitting motionless, like a nightjar, in the dappled shade of our Khormaksar garden, attracted by a puddle of water left from the daily watering. He was coloured a matt olive-green, rather larger, I thought, than the English cuckoo.

The sultanic family have been lords of Lahej for more than two hundred years. At various times they have controlled Aden, which the British took from them. They controlled also the Subeihi to the west, the adjacent Aqrabi, and malarious Haushabi. But when last I had dealings with Lahej in 1966 the Aqrabi, that small and reputedly

tough clan on the northern shore of Aden harbour, had preserved their independence of Lahej, Subeihi was intermittently hostile to Lahej control, and Haushabi had repudiated the Lahej claim to control its relations with the Protecting Power. Lahej authority was thus at a low ebb, and it seems doubtful if the sultans will survive the transition to independence.

After the advent of the British, there were attempts to reconquer Aden. In one of these, Lahej troops were encouraged by Sayyid Ismail, a religious leader, to believe that if they purged themselves of evil thoughts and dressed in spotless white raiment, symbolic of purity, they would defeat the fearful infidels, being rendered by piety impervious to firearms. In this simple creed and clad in white robes, the attack was launched with no weapons other than sticks, stones and war cries. When the mistaken nature of their belief had, by the first British volley, been painfully revealed, they fled and, when out of range, fell to abusing their mentor. Not to be shaken, the Sayyid reminded them that he had stipulated pure hearts and minds as essential to the efficacy of the stratagem. Quite clearly, he said, their minds were impure, and it was his view that the troops had harboured lustful thoughts for the foreign women of the garrison!

The Lahej sultans became, and remained for nearly a century, Britain's principal link with the interior, a connection which greatly and perhaps unnaturally enhanced their status. At the turn of the century Wyman Bury records the sultan dispensing justice through a window, hurling sentences, fines and admonitions at the prisoners below while avoiding the casement itself as vulnerable to a shot from an unknown quarter. Lahej justice was certainly rough and his caution understandable: as recently as 1934 the then sultan was extremely cross at a British protest against one of his sentences, for theft, against three slaves: the poor wretches had been *crucified* in the market place.*

Since 1951, during my time in Aden, there have been three sultans, two of whom were deposed by the British. The first was Sultan Fadhl (the family had been singularly unimaginative in the matter of names, mutating myopically through three or four variants for over two hundred years), and I can do no better than to quote Sir Tom

*Vide H. Ingrams, *The Yemen* (John Murray, 1963)

Hickinbotham who was governor at the time*:

> The sultan . . . was drinking heavily and was marrying with a frequency which bewildered the local Qadhi who got his registers in a muddle. Fadhl had succeeded his father . . . some three years before I became Governor and for a time had devoted himself wholeheartedly to the affairs of his State. When he was about eighteen years of age his father had broken with tradition and named Fadhl, his eldest son, as his heir, to the intense irritation of a collateral branch of the ruling house, who considered that their rights had thereby been infringed. There was a plot to murder the heir, and one afternoon Fadhl came off the tennis court in Lahej, all unsuspecting, to speak to a petitioner who at one time had been in his service. As the lad approached, the petitioner drew a revolver and shot him through the left eye and in the groin. He was hurried to the hospital in Aden and was later taken to Newcastle where . . . he recovered from his wounds, outwardly little affected, but inwardly he had suffered a blow from which he never really recovered. He felt the loss of his left eye terribly, and it impaired not only his actual vision, but, which was much worse, his mental vision.
>
> By 1951 he had ceased to take any real interest in his State, and had taken to drinking heavily, and my own efforts to make him pull himself together were no more effective than those of my predecessor. He became more and more eccentric and when the worse for liquor he was not responsible for his actions. The end came one wild night when, more than usually irritated by his relatives, he had two of them tied to stakes in his front garden and shot them himself from the flat roof of his home.

Sultan Fadhl fled to the Yemen, but was not allowed to remain there and finally took refuge in Jeddah, in Saudi Arabia. The Lahejis still speak well of him, which says little for the esteem in which the rest of the family are held.

He was succeeded by a young half-brother, Ali Abdul Karim, whom I knew slightly: in 1953 he stayed as my house-guest in Abyan while he was shown around the successful cotton scheme. He was amiable enough, a rather soft and pale young man, but beneath his

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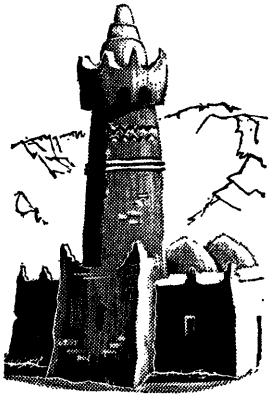
**Aden* (Constable, 1958)

good manners I sensed a resentment of British advisers. He was a courteous and considerate house-guest, and had an air of easy authority. He spoke excellent English.

Despite his obvious attributes and the hopes entertained for his rule by Sir Tom – who had him created Knight of the Order of the British Empire – his reign was as disastrous as, if less dramatic than, that of his predecessor. To a regrettable degree he fell under the influence of a family of Aulaqi Sayyids, hereditary religious notables, two of whom held high office in Lahej. Under their tutelage Lahej became a centre for pro-Nasser and anti-British propaganda, and when in 1958 the Governor ordered their arrest for seditious activity the young sultan left for London to protest. Only one of the Sayyids was caught, Abdullah bin Ali, the director of Lahej education, while two fled via the Yemen to Egypt.

Ali Abdul Karim's complicity in or toleration of seditious activity became evident over the next few months when large caches of arms were discovered at the Lahej village of Dar Saad on the Aden border, arms which could only have been smuggled from the Yemen, so that in July, when the disgruntled young man was in Rome, Great Britain withdrew recognition from him as sultan. He has since lived in Cairo.

He was succeeded by the present sultan, another Fadhl bin Ali: shakily or not, the family remained in power, stylish in their Indo-Arab costume, until British protection was withdrawn in 1967.



A Dhala mosque

CHAPTER IV

DHALA

North from Lahej the tarmac ends and the road becomes a dusty track. We travelled in a convoy of landrovers, with an escort of armoured cars, for security on the Dhala road was poor: the Quteibi were causing trouble again. Under high yellow dunes we crossed the shallow Wadi Tiban and headed across gravelly plains to Nobat Dukeim. To get away from my desk for a day or two was exhilarating, and in March the weather was still agreeable. I could feel the sun hot and dry on my skin, and a riffle of warm breeze. My mission was the ostensibly prosaic one of advising the Amir on the preparation of his budget for next year, but in South Arabia this was a mere starting point. Anything might happen.

Around the pink and gravelly plains the mountains ranged in a great arc. Behind us the ground sloped gently away into the morning sun to where the groves of Lahej showed dark, and Aden's spiky ridge humped blue against blue. The mountains here are singularly picturesque – more so, I think, than in any other part of the Western Protectorate. They have a story-book quality of variety and un-

expectedness in outline, colour and texture, and a perspective, a distance and proportion, giving them a quality uniquely satisfying. Yellow dunes sweep up their flanks in wind-carved folds; their silhouette tumbles from whale-back ridge to needle-pinnacle. Their colours vary with the sun – rose and copper at dawn, through the morning, blues, cobalt and ultramarine, drained grey while the sun is overhead through the hot noon hours, until evening throws magenta shadows deep between the bronze heights.

A few miles further on the track divided, one heading for Haushabi and the Yemen frontier at Kersh, while we bore away to the right for a gap in the hills towards Thumeir. Here we came to a shallow but clear trickle of water where, seeing a scuttle of grey in the undergrowth, I leapt up the hillside with my twelve-bore after a covey of *chikore*, the handsome large partridge-type bird, almost as big as a guinea-fowl. But they ran through the thick tamarisk scrub too fast for me, and the sides of the wadi were steep. When they broke cover and took flight on planing down-curved wings across the valley below me, they were too far for a shot and I had to return, hot and dusty, to the grinning soldiers of the halted convoy.

At Thumeir we were greeted by one of my favourite Arab officers, Aidrus Suleimani, bearded like an Elizabethan sea-dog, dark eyes twinkling, conscientious, jolly, with an unusual sense of discipline, one of those rare Arabs who may be likened to the best type of Indian officer of the old Indian Army, to whom it is no dishonour to render obedience within the framework of a service. Aidrus was an Aulaqi, of the likeable semi-nomadic Suleimani tribe, which was good reason for stationing him, two hundred miles from his homeland, at Thumeir, in the heart of a people no less proud than his own, the Quteibi.

After I had taken the salute of a guard of black-turbaned Federal Guards – shaking hands with each man afterwards in the local egalitarian tradition – we entered the two-storeyed stone fort, a courtyard surrounded by loopholed walls, barrack-rooms, cookhouse, and, betrayed by the hum of a generator, a wireless transmitter. Thick sweet tea from black-thumbed aluminium mugs, warm Coca-Cola, and a plague of flies. I never really resolved my conflicting reactions to this experience – amused affection at the effort the soldiers made to be hospitable and to please, fresh tea being brewed

in the cookhouse with a great deal of shouting, cushions being pushed under one's bottom as one sat on the floor, flies being kept at a distance by some ham-fisted soldier fanning with a very dirty towel; or irritation at the dirt, the thumb deep in the proffered mug of tea, the unwashed state of the cushions and above all the lack of privacy, or even of awareness of a need for privacy. Understandably, to tribal Arabs the advent of visitors is an event in their own remote valleys and villages, and they bring the tradition with them into the Army. They simply do not understand the European need for privacy, so that we drank our tea surrounded by all of the garrison who could be spared from guard duties. After a while I had to speak to Aidrus of secret matters and we withdrew to an inner room, but even there, through the doorway, curious faces peered continually to see what plots we were hatching.

So we sipped our sweet tea and fanned the flies away and glowered at the faces in the doorway (except for the main gates of the courtyard there were no doors in the fort, only doorways), and counted out several hundreds of pounds of tribal subsidy, while through the loophole windows I glimpsed the kites wheeling against the crags of Quteibi-land, saw-edged against the deep blue of mid-morning. The money – finance was then my province – was only one part of a current operation to keep the Quteibis quiet, and by now you may well ask 'Who are they, these Quteibis?'

First to get the pronunciation right, 'Quteibi' rhymes with 'put-may-be', with the accent on the second syllable and the 'Q' pronounced as 'K', and if you enquire from one of their young bucks he will tell you that they are the Wolves of Radfan. If you ask a linguist-historian he might tell you that their name recalls the vanished pre-Christian kingdom of Qataban of the incense routes. If you ask the Amir of Dhala he will tell you that they are an unmitigated set of scoundrels, brigands and blackmailers. From these several definitions your choice will depend on your outlook and, more particularly, the extent to which you have had to do business with them. I rather like the ones I've met. Quteibi officers of the Federal Guard, unawed by Aulaqi preponderance in that force, spoke out strongly when I was commissioned to enquire into alleged irregularities – a tough, independent lot. They are a tribe owing allegiance to no sultan or overlord; they have their own sheikhs and

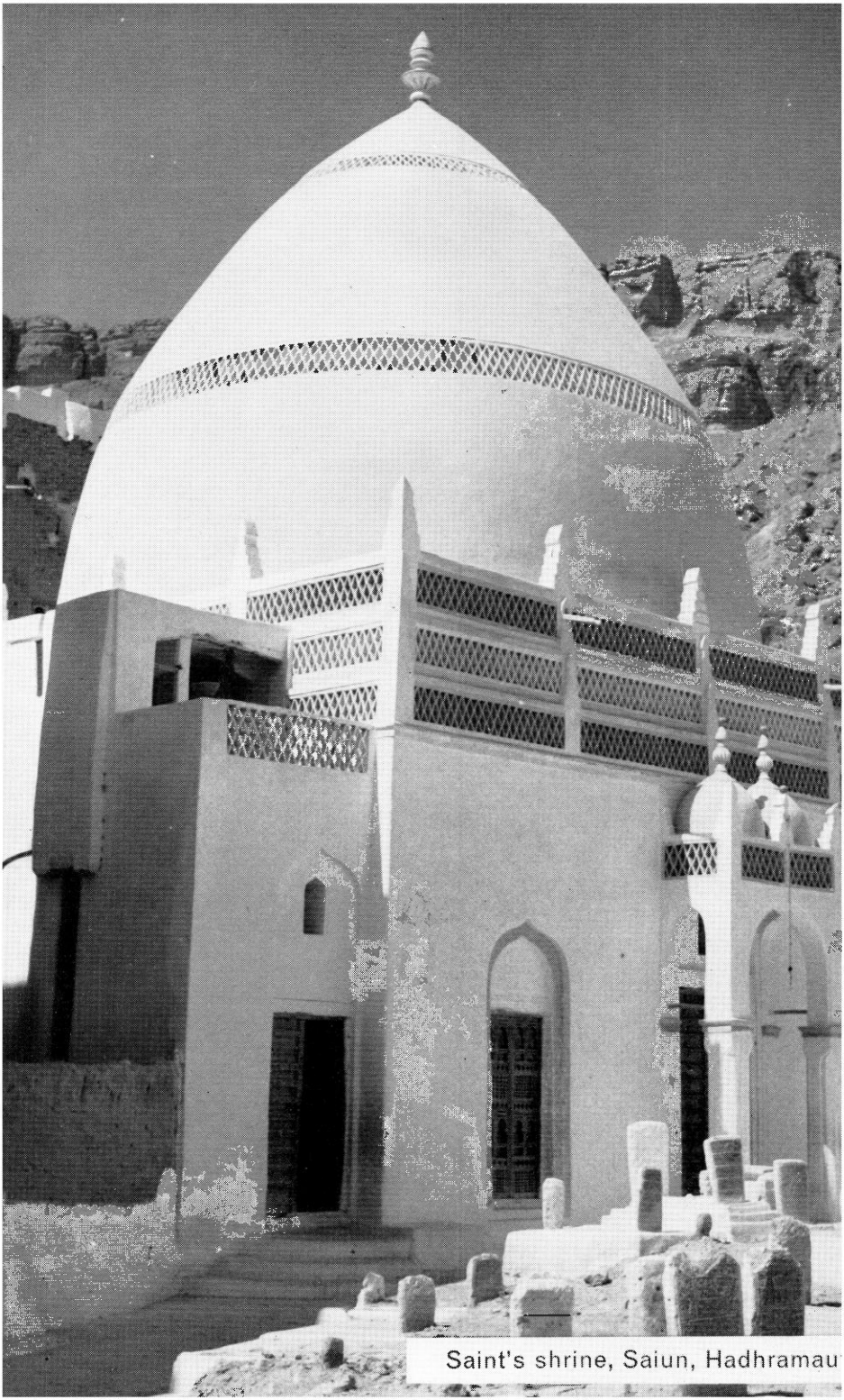
leaders, who exercise only limited authority over them. Their territory lies adjacent to the sole route between Aden and Dhala, a route also to Yemen via Qataba, and from time immemorial the Quteibis have been in a position to cut this route. This fortune they have not neglected. Writing of the 1930s, Lord Belhaven, a political officer who knew them well, says: 'It was rare for a year to go by without action being taken against them by the R.A.F. for some crime against travellers who had to pass by Thumeir, and half Thumeir then lay in ruins from that year's visitation.'*

As recently as 1964, the Quteibi were living up to their ancient reputation: on a day of gruelling heat three Very Senior Officials – two Permanent Secretaries and, no less, the Advocate General – were obliged to lie flat in the dust for several hours while Quteibi snipers cut notches in the shallow bank of earth which scarcely protected them. These dignitaries comprised a fact-finding-and-conciliation commission sent to Quteibiland to unscramble some more flagrant than usual breach of the peace. Times have not greatly changed in South Arabia!

It was eighty of these same Quteibi who, in 1928, on the rocky plain of Habil Hamra, fought a Yemeni army to a standstill – with some help from No. 8 Squadron, R.A.F. – and then reported to the R.A.F. commander, bearing on spears the severed heads of the defeated enemy. These are the Quteibi, the self-styled Wolves of Radfan.

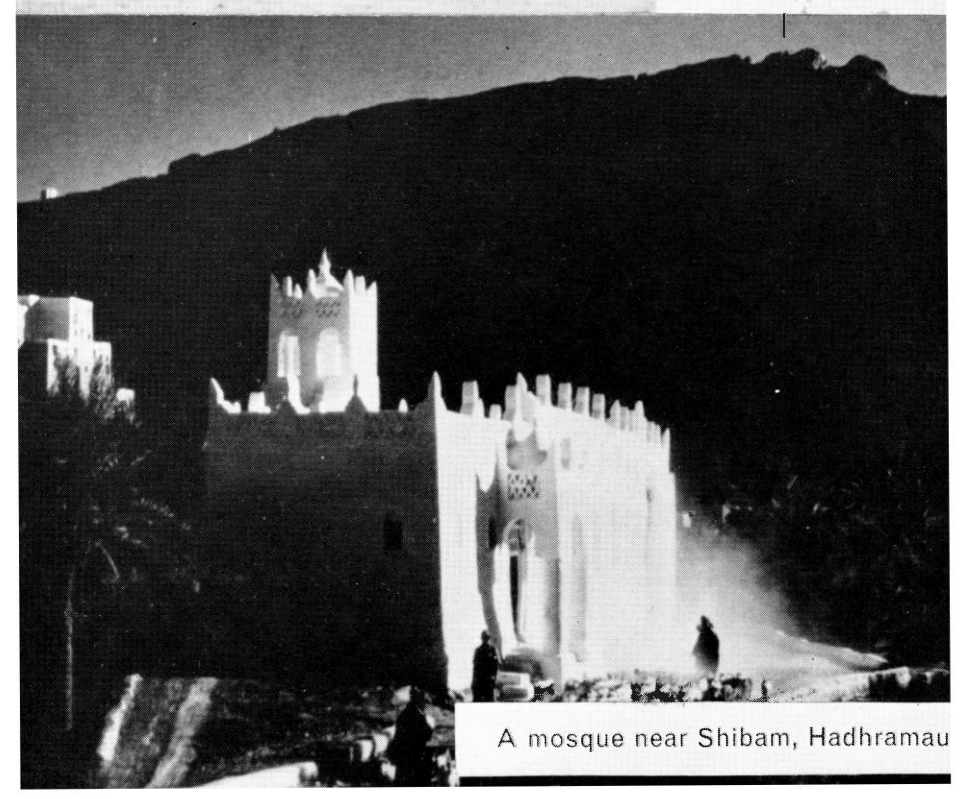
From Thumeir we set out at eleven o'clock, the freshness gone from the day, the valley hot, the boulders of the dry torrent-bed glimmering white in the overhead sun. This is the Wadi Hardaba and we had it to ourselves, the landrovers lurching between the boulders and the thin selvedge of acacia, tamarisk, cactus and aloes, the armoured scout-cars of the escort desert-khaki, with red and yellow cavalry pennons flying rakishly from their wireless aerials. A pack of baboons crossed ahead of us, babies riding pick-a-back, young ones frisking, fierce males snarling and chattering at us from the flanks and rearguard, until they vanished among the myrrh trees on the hillside. The rocky skirts and cliffs press closely about the valley here, and one becomes aware of aching muscles and bones as

**The Uneven Road* (John Murray, 1955)



Saint's shrine, Saiun, Hadhramaut

Shibam, Hadhramau



A mosque near Shibam, Hadhramau

one clings to door and dashboard against the lurching of the car. Dust from the leading vehicles rolls back in opaque white clouds, covering arms and face with white powder: eyebrows, eyelashes, forearms, are all curiously blanched. I chewed dried apricots and prunes, my personal standby for such journeys.

After an hour the valley closed in to a point where there was no way ahead except upwards. We had reached the foot of the Khoreiba Pass, the last obstacle to Dhala, lifting the road a thousand feet or more to the plateau. Here we were no longer in Quteibi but in Shairi country, ostensibly under the suzerainty of the Amir of Dhala, whose authority among the Shairis was only a shade more substantial than the myth that he had some slight authority among the Quteibi. Puffing and boiling, the convoy zigged up the rough track; and at the summit we emerged into a different scenic world. Here was the miniature plateau of Dhala, five thousand feet up, thirty-six miles square, ringed on three sides by mountains rising to seven and eight thousand feet – Jebel Jihaf to the west, Harir eastwards. The coolness was immediately apparent and welcome after the midday heat of the shuttered wadi, now whitely distant below us in the silence.

Despite the scale of the surrounding mountains, it is a miniature landscape: the eye fastens on the plateau, punctuated with little conical tors, each capped with a fortified house, tall, angular; on small fields, between meandering footpaths, where oxen are ploughing; on a movement of dark figures, women in black at a well-head. Freya Stark,* perceptive and vivid as always, compared it to the landscape of a painting, as in a child's story book, which might at any moment come to life. I think rather it is like those pictures hung before the class when learning French, in which as many objects and activities as possible are crowded into one landscape. 'See here, is *M. le Maire* entering the café . . . here is *la jolie bonne* buying cakes . . . here a dog is chasing a cat . . .' The Dhala landscape is like that too, only the commentary might read: 'See, here is the Amir shouting at the Quteibi sheikhs . . . here is a Shairi rebel sniping at the airstrip . . . here is a slave hurrying to fetch *qat* for his master . . . here is the political officer handing out British justice: is

**East is West* (John Murray, 1945)

that justice he is handing out to the man with the beard? No, it is a rifle he is giving away. . . .'

Miss Stark comments also that it is a landscape where something is always happening – or anything might happen at any moment. In this she is accurate. Despite the reputation of its people for spending their days sunk in a *qat*-induced torpor, things tend to happen at Dhala – things mostly disagreeable. The Political Officer, Peter Davey, was killed there in 1947; the British Agent, Major Seager, was stabbed and severely wounded there in 1950; my friend Bob Mounde, that gentle and cultivated man, was brutally murdered there in 1955. Certainly it is a landscape where anything may happen.

We headed among unfenced stony fields, past a handsome group of flame-of-the-forest trees, relic of a garden once planted by Belhaven and now exotically mature. Little villages of grey stone cube-houses dotted the landscape, with tall patches of millet and Indian corn, fields of pumpkins, chillies and onions, and *qat*. Shortly after one o'clock we arrived at the Political Officer's house just outside the town. Here I dismissed the escort to the military camp on the flanks of Jebel Jihaf, had a wash and then, over a quick gin before we went to lunch with the Amir, was brought up to date on local affairs.

The ruler of Dhala, the Amir, is the latest of a long line of hereditary rulers descended, it is said, either from half-caste slaves of the Imam of Sana or from Turkish-appointed governors: the alternatives may possibly amount to the same thing. The point is that the ruling house belong to none of the indigenous tribes but are interlopers of perhaps two hundred years' standing. The history of the line follows the familiar Arabian pattern of power, now waxing, now declining, depending on the personality of the ruler. There was Turkish intervention in the early 1870s, but in 1878 the Turks withdrew support from Their Man in Dhala, while the British-supported candidate, with the loan of a cannon from the Sultan of Lahej, chased his rival into Turkish refuge.

The Turks came again in 1915, and in 1928 the Yemenis. The situation must not be seen in clear-cut terms: the control of individual villages passed frequently from Amir to Turk to Yemeni to anarchic independence, as did authority or influence over the surrounding tribes and clans. It is this persistent lack of political cohesion, this

fragmentation, which makes the South Arabian scene so confused to this day, with rival groups contending for power in the Yemen, supported by rival groups of both Aden politicians and up-country rulers, and with tribes such as the Upper Yafai out of reach of any power bloc. Fundamentally, the cause is political irresponsibility: rugged independence is all very fine, but without some political cohesion, some sacrifice of self-interest, some willingness to compromise for the greater good, no progress and no prosperity can come about. It is depressing to admit that I have observed no signs of improvement in this direction in my years here.

Since the first treaty with the British in 1880, Dhala's history has throbbed monotonously, like an incurable ulcer, with Turkish intrigue, Yemeni intrigue, trouble with the Quteibis, the Shairis, the Azraqis, customs rows with Haushabi and Lahej. Frequently the authority of the ruler extends scarcely farther than the town of Dhala itself, and many whom the British, in their desire for administrative and political tidiness, have recorded as owing allegiance to the rulers of Dhala strongly repudiate the suggestion.

During the fifties, there was increased trouble from across the Yemen frontier, partly as a result of the Egyptian-inspired anti-British campaign and partly because there sits, immediately across the Yemen frontier from Dhala, a Pretender to the Dhala amirate, the exiled Amir Haidara. Haidara had been *de facto* ruler during the old age of his father, the once-respected Amir Naser, but had abused his trust, misgoverned outrageously and, after seizing the Treasury – a recurrent feature of South Arabian politics – was banished. Naser, his father, once a good friend of the British, had turned sour and unreliable, in spite of the award of the C.M.G., had entered into treasonable relations with the Yemen and had died, dishonoured, at Lahej. Before expiring he found time to sell to a dealer in Sheikh Othman the star and pendant of his C.M.G. With his death and the exile of Haidara, there was the usual confused family conclave as to the next in succession: at one stage of the proceedings the dispute as to whose turn it was to be Amir became so vexed that the British were invited to take over entirely the administration of the state. But in the 1950s this idea was untenable, even among the anachronistic British attitudes displayed during these years, and finally the young Shaful bin Ali had greatness thrust upon him.

Never was there a hero more reluctant than the Amir Shaful. He is slightly built, with a narrow face behind a large beaky nose, and the smallness of his features emphasized by the elaborate and highly coloured silk turban affected by well-to-do Dhalais. He speaks no English, but behind a diffident manner has great charm.

We landrovered through the dirty little town and climbed, in bottom gear and four-wheel drive, up the rocky tor dominating the peasantry below, on which stands the Amir's tall keep. He greeted us, wearing a bright yellow silk turban, open-necked shirt, European jacket and striped green and blue *footah*, in front of a guard of black-turbaned soldiers, and led us into the house. It is traditional in design with a narrow, irregular staircase winding through nests of rooms for five and six storeys, more sophisticated than most up-country houses, the windows glazed, the stairs well lit; in the reception room, a suite of highly veneered modern Italian furniture, arm-chairs, settees, occasional tables, pedestal ashtrays, all quite hideous. Here we drank orangeade, cool from a kerosene refrigerator, and made conversation: deplored the state of roads and the amount of money available for their upkeep; commented on the lateness of the rains – as with farmers everywhere, the rains were always a safe subject. Then he shooed from the room his retainers, secretaries, armed guards and others while he gave me the latest intelligence on the frontier situation.

At this point perhaps I should explain, lest the impression is given that I was expert in Arabic, that my Arabic was no more than a good working knowledge, both of the oral and the written word. I was able, when in regular practice, to conduct with ease day-to-day affairs, but would need to send for an Arab assistant if an unexpected situation arose in which unfamiliar words were frequent. Nor could I pretend to any polish in my use or understanding of the language: it was good plain stuff, no more. Three-quarters of my work came into the day-to-day category. I knew well, before he cleared the room and started his oration, that the Amir would complain of the paucity of Government's assistance in the matter of funds, rifles and ammunition; of the necessity for Government to take reprisals against Yemeni frontier incursions; of the need for a stronger detachment of troops at Dhala, and so on. I could manage this type of conversation unaided, without any difficulty.

So we had our little *tête à tête*, as much to bolster the Amir's importance with his followers as actually to transact business, and then went to the floor below for lunch. Here we had our meal on the floor in normal Arab fashion. It was a big party, with local notables, the officers of the Royal Marines and the Artillery, the R.A.F. Intelligence Officer and male members, including little boys, of the Amir's family. For such a gathering a splendid feast had been spread, the dishes covering entirely the centre of the floor, laid on white sheets, and the air was heavy with spices and food-smells. In the middle were doormat-sized platters heaped with rice, some cooked in fat to honey-brown, some boiled white in fine long, dry grains, some bright-coloured, orange and yellow, with cinnamon or saffron, mixed with almonds and pistachios. Three sheeps' carcasses were displayed, roasted whole, and several dozen chickens. There were bowls of broth and of stews, vegetables and potatoes and peas in spicy red gravy, the bowls mostly cheap, coloured Japanese enamel. Smaller pots and saucers of chillies, chopped onions and lime pickle spaced themselves wherever they could fit among the main provender. There were brown flaps of *chupatti*, unleavened bread cooked on a hotplate, both the water-mixed and the richer, butter-mixed varieties. Pudding was set out, all hugger-mugger among the meats, small dishes of tinned pineapple or banana custard and including, I was pleased to see, the delicious Dhala honey, heavily scented of mountain flowers.

When the Amir and I had taken our places, squatting among the most sumptuous and brightly coloured cushions at the head of the table, there sounded a sibilance of 'Bismillahs' as we leaned forward and dipped into the dish. The Arabs have the civilized habit of requiring no conversation during a meal: to each hour its pleasure—a time to eat and to enjoy food, a time to talk and to enjoy talk. Thus meals do not last long. I firmly support this tradition. I enjoy Arab food and can eat from the floor without discomfort, but prolonged conversation in a foreign language is exhausting, so that I was content, as the principal guest, to desist from eating as soon as I had had my fill, whereupon it is etiquette for the host to stop eating as well, and we could all leave the table. There was in Dhala an even more important local reason for not prolonging a lunch party beyond its prescribed and polite length—the acknow-

ledged need or custom for all men of substance at Dhala to retire after lunch to sessions of sweet silent *qat*.

Qat is a shrub, something like privet, cultivated in the highlands of the Yemen and Ethiopia at heights between four and eight thousand feet. It is grown also at Dhala, whose product is reputedly of high quality and is consumed locally. The botanical name is *Catha edulis*, which sounds like the name of a Byron heroine or an undiscovered Verdi opera. The young leaves are chewed while fresh and green, when it acts as a mild stimulant, the chewer achieving a feeling of confident alertness. *Qat* imported from Ethiopia and the Yemen is chewed in great quantities in Aden and Lahej, but the *locus classicus*, so to speak, of *qat*-chewing in South Arabia is Dhala.

Its evils appear to be social rather than pathogenic. Expert medical opinion is divided as to whether it is harmful, and the answer probably lies in the extent to which the addict indulges in it. And addicts they are: the arrival of the *qat* plane from Eritrea is the occasion of scenes of the wildest excitement at Aden airport, where dealers struggle to clear their consignments early through Customs, the advantage being that the fresher the leaves are at the point of sale, the higher the price.

Qat-chewing is a social habit. Seeing our cook rather down in the dumps, and knowing him to be short of cash, my wife took to bringing him daily a bundle of *qat*; but he accepted the kindness sadly enough, and said that it wasn't really the *qat* itself he enjoyed, it was going to the *qat*-parlours and sitting listening to the gossip. Chewing it by himself in his room wouldn't be the same thing at all.

These *qat*-parlours are a feature of the Aden social scene, usually in the upstairs room of a private house. The men sit around the walls, on the floor, chewing and gossiping. It is said to induce a thirst, specifically the illicit Muslim thirst which accounts for the large consumption of beer in Aden. Certainly it is a dreary and unattractive custom. The wadge of *qat* bulges the cheek like a cow with a cud; the teeth become stained, articulation and utterance become imprecise, while after a protracted session the addict becomes maddeningly stupid to talk to. For this reason no business of any sort could be conducted at Dhala after the *qat*-sessions had begun.

As to the pronunciation of the wretched word, perhaps the best illustration came from my distinguished old lawyer friend, the

late Teddy Nunn. On a government enquiry into the *qat* problem, after listening for several days to tedious evidence on the subject, and especially on the social evils attendant upon it, he remarked that the trouble with the working classes of Aden was not that they put the cart before the horse but the *qat* before the whores!

Aching from the journey, tired by conversation in Arabic and full of highly spiced lunch, I retired to siesta. Greyly the clouds came down over Jihaf; light rain, cheerless and northern, pattered on the closed shutters. Restless – I am accustomed to afternoons of heat and sun, with the ceiling-fans creakily twirling, not to grey clouds and rain – I browsed among my host's books. Here was Hugh Scott's *In the High Yemen*, the best general work on South Arabia. He has several chapters on the Dhala area, where he came in 1937 to collect insects for the British Museum. I commend the book strongly. It is in sharp contrast to much of the writing on Arabia, being distinguished in style and scholarly in content, while the photographs are excellent. It was on Jebel Jihaf, outside my window, that this quietly humorous scientist encountered *Vespa orientalis*, the local wasp (and a good name for the Other Woman to play opposite *Catha edulis* in the Byronic opera already mentioned!), a creature as big as a hornet, by which he was badly stung. I have wondered often if the ambiguity of his account of the incident was deliberate – and surely so elegant a writer would not have been slipshod – when he wrote that he had rendered the sting much less painful by 'applying neat brandy from a pocket flask'. He does not say whether he applied it externally or internally.

After an agreeable hour with Scott I peered across the Dhala landscape: all was still. Everyone was indoors, chewing *qat*. It had the drowsy air of Tennyson's Lotus Land, and finding a Tennyson among the books I opened it at random. It fell open at 'Morte d'Arthur', which seemed no less apt in mood than 'The Lotus Eaters', especially

> 'And all day long the noise of battle rolled
> Among the sedges by the winter sea . . .'

This fitted my mood, as well as the silent, overcast landscape, so taking two soldiers as escort I set out to discover the abandoned graveyard of British soldiers who were killed or died here during the 1904 Boundary Commission.

For a mile or so it was an easy walk along tracks among the fields, then ascending a small and stony tor, scrub-covered. In the hollow at the summit, hidden from the surrounding countryside, lies the cemetery, ringed by a low and broken wall. The graves are now all but indistinguishable, the burial mounds having sunk, and there are no headstones to name these British dead. I reflected on what they may have been, these young men in their twenties and thirties, back in the Kipling epoch of 1904 to 1906: in their khaki drill and Wolseley sun-helmets, brass-buttoned tight to the neck, putteed to the knees, spine-pads and cholera belts, long bayonets flapping from broad webbing belts, heavy Kitchener moustaches over young English faces.

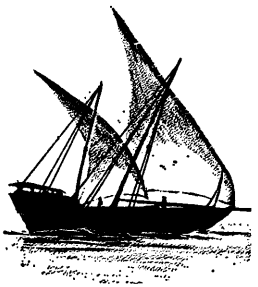
In the old Aden Secretariat I have seen a register of the names of the men who are buried here. Mostly of the Hampshire Regiment, I recall, with incongruously among them one Greek, described as a shopkeeper—presumably the enterprising Levantine who had a contract for feeding the officers' mess and supplying the men's canteen with bottled beer. He too lies among the British soldiers in this forgotten graveyard, at one of the least-known frontiers of what used to be the British Empire.

To enliven what was becoming a somewhat morbid outing, I recalled the delightful correspondence which I had unearthed at the Secretariat. I had conceived the idea of repairing and tidying the scarcely known cemetery, and dug out the oldest archives on the subject, to find that back in the early twenties an army chaplain had had the same idea. He thought that it should, among other refurbishments, be reconsecrated. Accordingly he wrote to his ecclesiastical master, the Bishop of Bombay, who replied with enthusiasm on beautiful letter-paper headed 'Bombay Castle' in embossed italics. The tone of the correspondence, as well as the address, had a deliciously Trollopean flavour. I hope I am not doing the worthy prelate an injustice – for I am presuming that he is no longer with us to reply – when I say that his style of writing conjures up most vividly the image of Bishop Proudie – in tropical-weight gaiters.

At all events, the bishop was delighted with the chaplain's suggestion that he should pop in at Aden on his way home (captain's table, I imagine), whizz up to Dhala, reconsecrate the cemetery, and whizz back again to his berth. There was a great deal of wordage on the

question of armoured car escorts – things haven't changed much, or have I said that before? – and whether the Political Resident had given his permission and whether the Tribes were Friendly. You didn't become Bishop of Bombay without some idea of what went on at the Outposts of Empire. Sad to relate, though, the scheme fell through, I've forgotten quite why. Perhaps the ship wasn't going to remain at Aden long enough; perhaps the bishop's lady thought the expedition would be too tiring for a man of his age. However, to compensate the presumably disappointed Aden end of the correspondence for his non-appearance, the bishop concluded the exchanges with a splendidly Trollopean gesture. Since he could not visit Dhala himself, he sent as a present for the Amir a photograph of himself – in full canonicals! The incongruity of a South Arabian chieftain hanging in his parlour a photograph of an Anglican bishop whom he had never even met strikes me as amusing.

Several days later I left Dhala – the Treasury rather tidier, the budget for the year decided – and the little Amir with his intractable tribesmen and vulnerable frontier.



An Aden dhow

CHAPTER V

KAMARAN

A Yemeni cockroach sat in the soap-dish and watched me attempt the impossible. It was one of those showers which require a constant pull on the chain to keep the water flowing, leaving but one hand free soaping. Since I was also holding a glass of sour Italian beer, this was difficult. I gave up trying to wash and just stood under the water. The stuff was lukewarm and tasted of creosote, but was a full degree cooler than the air temperature which was 104°.

A cough from the verandah. Dripping creosote and clutching the beer I pottered out, wrapping a loin-cloth around me. A brazen rasp of bugle tore, with difficulty, through the hot uncaring dusk. Across three miles of Red Sea the lights of the little port of Salif twinkled on the Yemen shore.

'Sir, O sir,' said Hassan Khan, 'It is Retreat, sir. . . .'

'Retreat? Oh, you mean Retreat . . . Does the Commissioner . . .?'

'It is custom, sir.'

Only that afternoon I had arrived on Kamaran, by air from Aden,

on a visit of inspection, and the routines of that far-flung outpost were unfamiliar.

Setting down the beer carefully I scuttled out through the dusty trellis to the patio above the sea. A red-turbaned policeman blew with immense *brio* at the Yemeni shore while a second, black-booted and immaculate, slowly lowered the limp flag from the staff. I stood awkwardly to attention, dripping, part shower, part sweat. As I pulled my stomach into what I hoped was a more military concavity, the loin-cloth gave notice that it rested more securely if I let my middle sag in its usual comfortable curve.

The firing broke out as I was tucking into a splendid meal of tinned rabbit, tinned peas, and tinned cherries: the cook had really gone to town, and served the cherries with the rabbit. There was a sudden crackle of rifle-fire three hundred yards away. What to do? Keep calm! Turn out the guard! Where the devil was the guard? Another burst – sounded like an automatic this time – from near at hand. A landrover roared up to the Commissioner's bungalow, headlights sweeping white over the Portuguese cannon, the pathetic patch of garden.

'What is it, Hassan Khan? Quick man. Are we in radio touch with Aden? Where's the Police Inspector?'

'No, no, sir. It is not firing. It is only fellows letting rip with fireworks, sir. The schoolmaster is getting married. It is custom here, sir. Sent me to ask you to attend. Would be great honour for these fellows to have Commissioner present at nuptials, sir.'

'Even a one-day-visiting temporary Commissioner?'

'Sir makes joke, sir.'

Even the landrover had difficulty getting through the narrow alleys to the house of the bridegroom, guided by the crackle of more fireworks. It was pitch black, and the August night wrapped itself over the island like a woollen jersey.

The room was small and crowded. Dusty fretted screens fitted the glassless window alcoves. We sat on high string beds round the walls, tall shadows reaching up from the yellow pressure-lamps to the ceiling of untrimmed poles. A table with a yellow plastic cloth bore brass censers of rosewater, and every now and again we were flicked with the stuff. The perfume, heavy and overbearing, vied with sweat and goat.

There were thirty men, squatting high-kneed on the beds. They wore white cotton vests or shirts, white Yemeni skull-caps and *footahs*. A *footah* is a kitchen tablecloth, checked or striped or patterned, wound round the waist, kilt-wise. The more modest sort wound them to just below the knee, the city-slickers to ankle-length. They were clean-shaven except for the elderly imam, a small wizened man with a fine high-Arab face, sharp-boned, who dignified his office with a fringe of silver beard and a high turban.

The bridegroom, a young Adeni in his early twenties, with a sulky handsome face and the air of weary disdain common to Arabs when not at ease, hunched in a corner. His red and yellow turban was elaborately wound for the occasion, but sadly betrayed by a double-breasted blue jacket of European style across his thin shoulders. He cuddled a borrowed sword, sheathed in green velvet starred with tinsel sequins.

Those who could read passed among them a book from which they read in a high gabbling nasal monotone, rising liturgically at phrase ends. The remainder came in with droned responses at intervals. These were villagers, towns-people, a small tight community, and like a village congregation in England they knew all the chants and refrains. I wished I might have joined in too.

It was from a book of the Traditions of the Prophet, the 'Haditha', that they read and not from the Koran. I tried to discover whether the portions so confidently wailed from scriptures were those having particular application to marriages, but could elicit no intelligible reply. 'It was what they always read on these occasions', and the moment was not proper for protracted theological discussion.

Coca-Cola appeared, and a black-skinned fisherman passed among us carrying a bottle of perfume, with which he dabbed our hands and smeared our arms. It was called 'Bint es Sudan', meaning 'Girl of the Sudan', and was stronger than the rose-water. A lot stronger. The combination of rose-water, Bint es Sudan and goat was intoxicating, and as though this were not enough, on the table there smouldered two incense burners, little jars of baked clay, giving off a pungent aromatic odour and a great deal of smoke. It was not incense they told me. That was too expensive. It was the wood of a certain tree which came from the Abyssinian shore, and I felt mildly

disappointed that here, so close to the ancient incense route, we had to make do with this African substitute.

We formed up into a procession in the dark uneven lane outside. The pressure-lamps preceded us, and a slave woman, ululating shrilly. The bridegroom and the imam led, while Hassan Khan and I were pressed to link arms with them. I thought this might spoil the show, and anyway the lanes were so narrow that no more than two abreast was possible. A youth threw fire-crackers in our path, banging and echoing and smoking in the alleys. It was all right so long as they went off as planned, but in some the action was delayed and the procession halted awkwardly, a few feet from some hissing and spluttering infernal machine, not sure whether to maintain momentum and walk with dignity over it, risking burned ankles and singed *footahs*.

We circled the village, myself hot and rather uncomfortable, almost literally spare man at a wedding. The chanting continued. It was awkward not knowing the responses, so I intoned a low *basso profundo* hum at appropriate moments, and tried to avoid the eyes of my jostling companions. Later I gained confidence and fearlessly sang out – with no thought, I do aver, of irreverence – scraps recollected from the Litany.

'Allahu akbar', sang the Kamaranis.

'The Lord's Name be Praised', sang I.

'Allah the Most Merciful and Compassionate', sang the joyous wedding guests.

'And Thy Name shall show fooooorth Thy Praise', echoed the Acting Commissioner.

At the house of the bride, stamping and clapping and the shrill songs of women greeted us. The little courtyard was yellow with oil lamps, and the women, unveiled, stood in a half-cricle about it. The bridegroom entered. A scuffling, an animate paroxysm, caused me to stand sharply back. At my feet a newly slaughtered goat lay kicking, a servant holding back the head to show the severed throat. The pool of blood filled and spilled among the dusty footprints across the threshold, for this is the custom on high days and holidays.

Some years before, when new to Arabia, on just such an occasion I had made a notable boob. Invited to a great feast in Yafai country,

I had been escorted through village streets to my host's high-towered fortress, like one of the smaller Border keeps. As I drew near, I observed with distaste the slaughter of a sheep across my path and the mess of blood spurting horrifically to my very instep. Full of Village Welfare and Uplift, I improved the shining hour with a sharp lecture to my poor host on the need for a central village slaughter-yard. He told me then that it was the custom so to honour a guest. I lost face that day.

The bridegroom seated himself on a cot in the court. The women shrieked and wailed, high vibrating notes, bizarre and wild. In front of the groom a bowl. Hassan Khan pressed two shillings into my hand.

'It is the custom, sir.'

I followed his lead and placed the money into the bowl, a token wedding gift, shook hands with the embarrassed young groom and retired to the darkness of the alley without. I was stealing the show, and, after all, it was his wedding.

Early the next morning we roared over the empty heart of the island in a police landrover. There was an illusion of coolness in the seven o'clock air and the lightest breeze blew over the open and empty expanse where gazelles flickered in all directions. In the middle of this waste was erected a business-like road sign which said, 'Halt at Major Road Ahead'. Since the landrover was the only vehicle on the island, and since the track on which we stood led from three cottages at one end of the island to the even less populous southern end, I was perplexed! On further inspection of this desert kingdom I discovered that the whole island was dotted with the most splendid and careful road-signs, mile-stones, pedestrian crossings and so on. Apparently it had been the one harmless eccentricity of a previous Commissioner, who had passed no less than seventeen years on this Red Sea sandspit and had carefully marked out twenty-two-foot carriageways leading from nowhere in particular to nowhere in particular. His mania for signboards found its highest expression at the air strip where, beside the low white coral hut which is all that Kamaran offers by way of terminal facilities, there stands a large black notice-board. It is worth quoting in full:

Established 1882

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

i Land of Two Moons. Kamar = Moon; Kamaran = Two Moons.
Standing on the highest point observe:
Moon proper rising in the East and
Moon reflected in sea on West.
So they say. We haven't tried.

ii Yes, it is very hot in summer.
Humidity high.

iii Yes, it rains sometimes.

iv Yes, plenty of water, 200 brackish wells. We drink distilled water and prefer it.

v Europeans? Normally just one.
Quite normal.

vi Lonely? No.

vii Fishing? Marvellous, not of expanding variety.

viii Cinema? Yes, but no films.

ix Trees: How many? Both are flourishing, thank you.

x Name three people we would take with us to a desert island? Can't say. Don't know what a desert island looks like.

xi You are standing fifty-one feet above sea level. On the level.

Later that morning, going through the files in the dusty office above the sea, I found an indent, dated 1939, for twenty-four Belisha Beacons.

What was I doing on Kamaran, and why had this Red Sea sandspit a British Commissioner? Kamaran is something of an oddity in international law. During their second occupation of the Yemen it had belonged to the Turks but in 1915, during the First World War, the Turks withdrew, unresisting, when a British party from Aden came to capture it. By an obscurity in the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923 the status of Kamaran was left in doubt and the British have remained

there undisturbed. Even the Yemen has laid no strong claim to it although it has been mentioned in Anglo-Yemeni talks, while the people themselves, who are of mixed blood – Arab, Danakil, Sudani – and of the Sunni branch of Islam, have no wish to pass under the rule of the Zeidi (Shiah) imams of Sana. Until 1952 the island was the location of a quarantine station for Muslim pilgrims making the journey to Mecca, but it was closed in that year and there is now little occupation for the people.

'The British' on Kamaran have never numbered more than one solitary officer, administering paternal justice and dispensing a little aid – fishing gear, cement, powdered milk and the like – to the poor but not discontented islanders. The British Commissioners have tended to be agreeably eccentric, like the traffic-sign enthusiast, and if orthodox when first they came to the island they rarely left it without acquiring a noticeable zaniness.

We shot two gazelle for the kitchen, which greatly delighted the police since their diet is monotonous. Indeed, the police were delighted with my visit altogether, for it provided them with someone to salute. I had only to appear on the verandah in my bathrobe and half a dozen police sentries on distant bluffs and headlands would crash to attention, presenting arms with a panache worthy of St James's.

I worked hard after breakfast – inspected guard-rooms, sea-water distillery, quarantine station, paid £30 of customs receipts into the Treasury (five different keys required), fined a poor man twelve shillings for fishing without a licence, and authorized the loan of my landrover to the bridegroom for further jollifications.

We toured the village, where stands a most agreeable Turkish mosque of white stone, arched and bayed and recessed ,with a demure little minaret and traces of competent wood-carving in its window frames. But never was quite so desolate a village: its total population is only fifteen hundred, and of these many of the men are away working for the oil companies of nearby Arabia. Half the buildings are in ruins, matching the even older ruin of a Portuguese fort which crumbles over the tiny harbour. Three slim *sambuks*, the local fishing-craft, were drawn up on the white coral foreshore, and a Greek shopkeeper, an outrageous solar topee fastened under his chin with a black bootlace, leered with commercial monopolism over

the indigent Kamaranis. They burn coral there for lime (the wood has to be brought from Ethiopia, for none grows on the island), and I had a happy quarter-hour fingering its obscure fantasticisms, purple and rose and white, strange and hardened, crepitatious, convoluted, branch and fan and antler.

I was required to exercise the Commissioner's launch. It brought up smartly at the jetty beneath the bungalow – an idiosyncratic jetty borne on low arches and terminating in a little pink pavilion. We solemnly stalked along this jetty, small police figures saluting madly in the distance. Hassan Khan wore his sun-helmet. The boat's crew of three stood in attitudes which, if not quite attention, indicated a sense of occasion. I felt like Nelson embarking at Portsmouth. I wished I had brought my sword!

In a wide sweep we toured the waterfront, our wake rocking the fishing boats, and most of the population assembled on the shore to see us pass. The Greek shopkeeper waved his hat. We slid gently past the crumbling low bluffs of cliff; the glassy water threw back the sun; the sky was burnished silver. Long green pipe-fish darted from our path, and we saw the slim menace of a great shark pass in the blue water beside us.

The plane carried me back towards Aden, landing specially to pick me up on its route from Asmara. Even the most modest would not deny himself a slight sense of occasion at having an aeroplane go out of its way to pick him up – rather like having one's own private railway carriage. The fifteen brown and barren miles of Kamaran wheeled away into the glare of the afternoon sea.

'Sir,' said the pretty stewardess, 'I don't want to disturb you, but there is something moving in your luggage.'

'I have no luggage – only this overnight bag.'

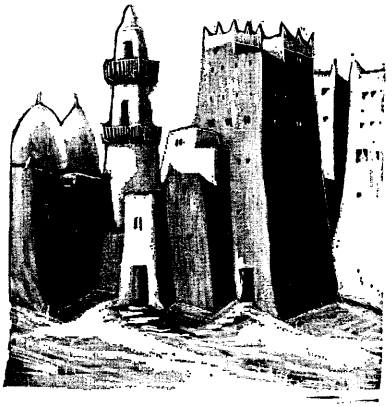
'But a large box was put aboard for you at Kamaran. And it's walking about the freight-room.'

The oddness, the off-beat madness of the island, was following me even into the aircraft. We lurched aft. There, in the freight compartment, stood a large cardboard box. From within it came a vigorous scratching noise, horrid and rodent-like, and suddenly it moved three inches sideways. The girl and I looked at each other.

'Never saw it before in my life.'

'It was the nice Indian clerk who put it aboard. See it's labelled "To the Acting Commissioner. With Compliments".'

Gingerly I undid the string, flung the cover off and stepped briskly backwards. A clashing hard noise, a snapping noise, a scuffling. Fascinated, rooted, we watched something edge its way up over the end of the box. A hairy claw. A pincer. Two protuberant eyes. We found ourselves looking sheepishly at the biggest crab in the Red Sea!



Said, Upper Aulaqi Sheikhdom

CHAPTER VI

THE INTERIOR

The Political Background

The Aden Protectorate was composed of a number of independent Arab states in treaty relations with the British Government, which was the Protecting Power. In extent it was about 115,000 square miles, in shape a triangle with its apex at Perim on the Bab el Mandeb, the narrow strait at the southern end of the Red Sea. It had a coastline, remarkably straight, of some 700 miles along the Gulf of Aden, and an inland frontier, drawn mostly with a ruler in a straight line across unmapped desert, from Perim and angling north-eastwards, dividing the Protectorate from first the Yemen and then from Saudi Arabia. The eastward side of the triangle, imprecisely demarcated ran from the coast up into the desert, and was the frontier with the Sultan of Muscat's province of Oman, a remote and sparsely populated region.

A coastal plain eight to ten miles deep fringes the shore, and laps in sandy skirtings against dark mountains which run the length of the

country, rising to peaks of seven and eight thousand feet. Beyond the mountains the desert slopes away to the north to the great waste of Southern Arabia, the *Rub al Khali*, the Empty Quarter.

The climate is harsh throughout, hot and humid on the coast, hot and dry inland. In the greater part of the territory there is no measurable regular rainfall except in one or two favoured hill districts, and it is in effect a total desert – coast, mountains and beyond – with oases along the few uncertain watercourses. Coastal temperatures have an annual average of 94° noon shade – a very high *average* figure – with very little drop in temperature at night. Inland, especially on the desert fringes, the range is more extensive, rising to 110° or more (shade) of dry heat by day, with nights sharply cold in winter.

No census has ever been taken but the population is probably in the region of 600,000, that is, very sparse, as might be expected in so starved and drought-stricken a land. It is entirely Arab and there are no resident foreign communities. A small but valuable community of Jews – Oriental, i.e. Arabian, Jews – was evacuated to Israel in 1948. Government officials and army officers, British at the officer level, were stationed throughout. Excluding British Army units, few and occasional as they were, the total number of Europeans permanently residing in the Protectorate was, in the fifties and sixties, not more than two hundred.

The greater part of the people are engaged in subsistence agriculture or fishing, and dwell in small hamlets or villages. There are few towns of any size. In the east, Mukalla and the Hadhramaut towns of Tarim, Saiun and Shibam are sizeable: in the west, Lahej may just claim to be a town but prosperous Abyan has only Zingibar and Jaar which I rate as no more than large villages, and the same applies to Dhala, Mudia, Lodar and Beihan. Most of the people are settled, not nomadic, and although tribesmen describe themselves, and are somewhat derisively labelled by townsmen, as *bedu*, that is, nomads, there are few beduin. The Bel Harith of Beihan are only semi-nomadic; true nomads are to be found among the tribes north of the Hadhramaut valley, in the deserts – Seiar and Manahil. All are Muslim, of the Sunni branch of Islam, but the poorer people have little real understanding of their religion, while the more enlightened tend to make great play of its formal observances – prayers in public

and so on – with, in my observation, little comprehension of the spiritual content of their attractively austere religion.

Arabic is the language of the people, with the exception of the remote Mahra tribes in the east and the islanders of Socotra, neither of which, although linguistically interesting, is numerically significant. There are a number of traditional but minor industries – weaving, the pressing of sesame oil, the drying of fish for sale inland, charcoal burning, boat building and the carrying trade, either by camel or by lorry. In so poor a country emigration has always attracted a proportion of the people and there are communities of Protectorate Arabs in Indonesia, Singapore and East Africa, where they have successfully engaged in commerce, and until recently there was one in Hyderabad, Deccan, where they were employed in the army of the Nizam. In the United Kingdom also communities of South Arabians have established themselves, mostly from the western districts. When the first-ever election was to be held in the small western sheikhdom of Shaib, in the early 1960s, and an electoral register of adult males was drawn up, it appeared that there were fewer enfranchised Shaibis in the homeland than there were in Birmingham! Foreign remittances from these emigrant communities are significant, if local, elements in local economies. Indonesian restrictions on the export of profits and capital seriously and adversely affected the economy of the Hadhramaut in the early 1950s, but the losses were recouped by that industrious community by expansion into other countries, notably Saudi Arabia.

In character the Protectorate Arab, who is ethnologically distinct from the Arabs of Central and Northern Arabia – as he is different in dress and appearance – reflects closely the environment in which he is set. The harshness of the climate and the terrain, the poverty of the soil, the isolation, by great deserts and oceans, from other lands, and of valley from valley by mountains and arduous unsafe tracks, has bred in him a fanatical and narrow outlook, a fierce suspicion and arrogance born of ignorance, a grasping rapacity born of abject poverty. He is hospitable, courteous to guests and strangers, proud, violent, conceited. These are necessary generalizations: individuals inevitably are exceptions. Among my Arab friends of many years' standing I identify traits as varied and complex as those of my own race – extravagant generosity, quick comprehension and sensitivity

to the feelings of others, humour able to laugh at itself, kindness and tolerance, a sly acknowledgement of their own weaknesses.

Society is composed of a number of tribes and clans of varying strengths and importance, the tribe often acknowledging a common ancestor. Within each tribe is usually a ruling clan or family from among the men of which is chosen a supreme chief who may be titled sultan, emir or sheikh. The authority of the chief depends on his wealth or strength of character, and varies widely between tribe and tribe, some being autocratic and absolute rulers, others little more than spokesmen for councils of elders. The more important of them are comparable in wealth, territory and influence with, say, the lesser emirs of Northern Nigeria, while others can barely maintain authority within the confines of a single village. Inter-tribal warfare, blood feuds within clan and family, have been the pattern of daily life for centuries, aggravated during the fifties and sixties by political tensions and subversion from without. The fragile security brought by the British – too little and too late – has barely affected these traditions of violence.

Within this tribal structure society comprises three or four principal divisions: first are the holy men, or *seiyyids*, ostensibly descended from the Prophet Mohammed, not all of whom are holy in character but who are locally influential. They do not bear arms. Second are the tribesmen, the largest and most influential section, from among whom are elected the rulers. Third are landless labourers or slaves. In the Hadhramaut there are townsmen, but in the west this class has barely emerged. There are an increasing number of young men who have been educated to intermediate or secondary level, but these tend to gravitate to Aden, where there is employment.

Women are generally veiled except among the poor, and I have avoided seeking information about them, it being liable to misunderstanding and also ill-bred for a man, and a stranger, to make such enquiries. Fortunately for the curious there have been a number of distinguished lady travellers – Doreen Ingrams, Freya Stark, Dr. Eva Hoek – who have each, with propriety, been able to write about the women of South Arabia, so that I may with a clear conscience remain silent.

The dominant feature of the economy is a negative one – the absence of water. In most of the territory only a bare subsistence

economy is possible – maize and millet for food, fodder for a handful of cattle. Where flood irrigation has been possible along the coast, from rains falling far back in the mountains, cotton cultivation has been introduced, and this is the sole export cash crop of significance. Boom years in Aden have also developed, with Government stimulus, vegetable production in the Protectorate for sale in Aden. Tube-well drilling, so far mostly exploratory, may be capable of expansion and so increase production, although the economies of this relatively expensive capital investment in terms of marketable produce are as yet uncertain.

Fishing communities make a scanty living along the coast, using more modern gear introduced and made cheaply available by Government. The difficulties of development of this industry are inadequate statistics of fish population and ecology in the Gulf of Aden, a small, unskilled and conservative fishing community, and the need for capital investment in cold storage facilities, canning and marketing. There are no industries, and no mineral wealth has yet been discovered although a comprehensive survey has yet to be made. There is probably oil along the northern desert fringes, and prospecting has been going on for some years, notably in the eastern states of Quaiti and Kathiri and the mainland domains of the Sultan of Qishn and Socotra.

The political history of the Protectorate is one of anarchy and confusion, of endless tribal and dynastic squabbles. The western districts, with Aden, formed part of the Yemen until asserting their independence, but eastwards the rule of the imams was uncertain indeed and never effectively reached as far as the Hadhramaut and its coast. It is the Yemeni claim to those districts, dealt with more fully later, that has caused so much trouble in the Western Protectorate. The coming of the British in 1839 did not for many years make any significant impact on the interior. The British were content to deal with the Sultan of Lahej and used him as their principal agent in dealing with the tribes. Treaties were made with those tribes near Aden but the rest of the territory was ignored until some time later.

There were two reasons for the lack of interest. India had taught the British the value of restricting their political activities to what was immediately necessary, avoiding as far as possible the escalation, or chain reaction, of treaty-making with ever-more, distant native rulers.

The British wanted only to make secure the coaling and commercial station at Aden and had no territorial ambitions in South Arabia. The second reason is that the territory clearly had no economic potential, either as a producer or as a market. Its manifest poverty made it an unattractive proposition and the British left it alone.

Until the First World War, contact with the interior remained slight – although by 1914 there were no less than thirty-two treaties with impoverished rulers – and even by the end of the Second World War contact amounted to very little. It remained a territory for the explorer and traveller – Van der Meulen, Freya Stark – and the few Political Officers – Jacob, Reilly, Ingrams, Lake and Belhaven. Such treaties as were made were at the request, the importunity even, of the rulers, not at British instigation. They brought to the rulers a very real protection and advantage; to the British they brought, usually, more expenditure and more trouble.

It is important to appreciate this point since it may so easily be assumed, even by those well disposed to Britain, that 'Protectorate' is nothing but a euphemism for territory acquired by the Protecting Power for its own advantage. The truth is less simple. A treaty with the British was sought by most of the small sultans and sheikhs of the interior: they needed no coercion. A treaty gave protection, by recognition of an individual as ruler, against the claims of relatives and the ever-present anarchy in which no ruler's position is ever really safe. In the case of frontier states it gave protection from Yemeni aggression – not always effective, but worth having. It provided a stipend and money, rifles and sometimes troops for use against rebellious elements of their own tribes. It provided employment for their young men in Government forces; status to the ruler over his fellows in his access to the source of money and arms; occasional handouts for developments; and a channel for the statement of needs for a clinic or a school. Generally speaking, once the tribes in the immediate vicinity of Aden had been secured, Britain's commitments in the interior were liabilities, unwanted and unproductive of anything except trouble and expense. The treaties, then, are the historical basis for the existence of the Aden Protectorate, and the process of treaty-making was active until recently.

In 1928 the Royal Air Force, extending the experiment in imperial policing first introduced in Iraq, assumed responsibility for the

security of the Protectorate. This was not without significance, for the young R.A.F. showed a keen interest in the country and its intelligence officers were among the first to undertake regular touring among the tribes and the methodical accumulation of information about the country which formed the basis of much later work.

In spite of this increased activity there were in 1934 still only two officers of Government dealing with Protectorate affairs. At this time, however, fresh contact was established with the Sultan of Quaiti at Mukalla, and in 1936 a new type of treaty was signed with him by which he agreed to accept a 'British Resident and Adviser'.

These new 'advisory treaties' extended beyond the simple 'protectorate treaties' which had hitherto governed relations between the British and the states and provided that the state would accept British advice in any matter affecting the good government and welfare of the people with the exception of matters concerning religion and the administration of religious law. The British commitment was thus deeper. Advisory-type treaties were subsequently made with most of the states of the interior.

If the criticism is made that the British were culpably slow to develop contact with the Protectorate and to shoulder in the interior the burden of what Lord Lugard described as the 'Dual Mandate' of protecting or colonial powers, there must be recognized in addition to the causes already mentioned the influence on affairs of the character of the people. One of the foremost and most sympathetic of authorities is Doreen Ingrams who, in her *Survey of Social and Economic Conditions in the Aden Protectorate*,* remarks: 'Two important factors must be taken into account when considering the gradual development of British contact with the people, and the consequent schemes for improving their conditions. First, the innate conservatism and suspicion of the majority of the inhabitants, and secondly, the poverty of the country . . . the obstructive, selfish, suspicious, or even apathetic attitude of the people . . . hampers all schemes for their improvement.'

It is difficult to convey to outsiders, even those with experience of underdeveloped countries, the backwardness of the Aden Protectorate. I came to Arabia after ten years in barren and backward

*Government of Aden, 1949

territories, but nothing I had experienced prepared me for the anarchy, the tribal feuding, the administrative chaos, the lack of the simplest tools of government, the chronic insecurity. That was in 1952. Doreen Ingrams had written "Government" is a misnomer for the type of misrule which prevails throughout most of the Western Protectorate and a good deal of the Eastern'.

This being so, the progress made by 1966, when I left South Arabia was the more remarkable. Tarmac roads had begun to creep across the dunes and up the lava wastes of the passes; a power station now lights the villages of Abyan where in my time they were illumined dimly by oil lanterns; the thump of pumping engines is heard at well-heads throughout the land, and the drone of tractors. Men wear shirts who then went in indigo, and every fishing vessel now has an engine. Crops grow where before was desert, men travel where before they remained in the security of their villages, aircraft take graded tomatoes from upland smallholders to Aden Wholesale Market. States administrations, previously little more than the sultan and his scribe and a box of money under the bed, are now able to deploy staff for their more diverse functions; states customs barriers have been swept away; states forces have been centralized into a Federal Guard.

It would be easy to point to flaws – no, more than flaws, to gaping holes, in the structure and effectiveness of the Federal and states administrations; but to know just what great progress had been made it is necessary to recall – there are a few of us with long enough service to know personally – what things were like fifteen years before. Considering the state of the country, the small number of expatriates employed and the utter dependence on the subsidies of the British Treasury, the wonder is not that things are backward but that so much was achieved with so little.

On the political side also, while the faults are easy to see, the progress must be acknowledged. Much that was achieved may be suspect as mere façade, vulnerable to the slightest tremor, but even to set up a façade, given the materials available, was an achievement. With time the chambers behind the façade might have been made habitable, but the intransigence of the Protectorate chiefs, coupled with British haste to withdraw, has denied the infant Federation time to establish itself.

It was during the 1950s that an attempt was first made to reform or rationalize the chaotic pattern of petty states by forming a Federation. The idea was neither new nor original. It was not difficult to see that the existence of seventeen or so little states was anomalous and an obstacle to progress; but the time was not yet ripe. The attempt was, however, worth making, for although it was premature it germinated the idea among the rulers. Thereafter the concept was held always before them – the advantages to be derived from it, the increased aid which would be available, prestige, bargaining power, the economies to be achieved, the glitter of appointments wider and more lucrative than the rule of small and poor sheikhdoms. These were the carrots dangled before the sultans to encourage their onward progress.

There was also, pricking them painfully from behind, a compelling goad. The rulers were feeling the pricks of Yemeni aggression (of which more later) during the fifties at the same time as Egypt, envigoured by its revolution, began its Pan-Arab, anti-British campaign and let loose its propaganda batteries against the rulers as puppets of the British. There was, too, an uneasy consciousness of the stirrings of democratic, anti-authoritarian movements, muted as yet in South Arabia but none the less a new and disturbing element seeping in among the sultanates. More education and more military service for the tribesmen, with military training courses in Jordan or Khartoum or even in England, produced a broadening of their outlook. Across the water India had demonstrated the short shrift given to rajahs and nawabs and nizams (had the sultans been perceptive, they might have observed how Great Britain honoured her obligations to rulers who had been her faithful allies), while in Egypt the overthrow of Farouk gave to traditional rulers everywhere food for thought.

Urged therefore by self-interest, by British advice and inducement – and British aims were reasonably disinterested, based on the not uncommon attitude of what's-good-for-the-natives-is-usually-good-for-us – and alarmed by these pressures, the rulers continued to discuss the idea of federation during the fifties. There were talks in London in 1956 and again in 1958 and on 11th February 1959 came into being the Federation of Arab Amirates of the South, composed of six states – Dhala, Fadhli, Lower Yafai, Audhali, the Upper Aulaqi Sheikhdom and Beihan. The only significant absentee was Lahej,

never co-operative and at that time recovering from the change of ruler occasioned by Ali Abdul Karim's defection already described, but six months later under its new ruler it declared itself ready and was admitted as a member state.

With the creation of the Federation a new treaty of friendship and mutual co-operation with Great Britain was made which provided for the continuation of existing treaties and added a commitment by which Britain was obliged to provide advice and financial and technical assistance. This was on the same lines as the former treaties but the restatement and the more formal provisions of this treaty gave a new impetus to Britain's role in South Arabia.

A date-palm

CHAPTER VII

ABYAN

Some forty miles up the coast from Aden lies Zingibar, capital of the Fadhli Sultanate. The Fadhlis have a claim to fame as the only Southern Arabians mentioned in Arabia's literary legacy, the Thousand and One Nights. The story depends for its effect on a nice appreciation of the disastrous social solecism in polite Arab society committed by anyone so lacking in control as to break wind. The tale is that a certain well-bred young Fadhli named Abu Hassan, hitherto of high repute, committed at a crowded and genteel gathering, his own wedding feast no less, the unforgivable social *gaffe* of easing his bowels, all inadvertently, by an uncontrollable and reverberating discharge. The occidental equivalent would be appearing drunk at a Buckingham Palace reception. Deeply mortified, the young man fled the country to put the memory of his shame distant in space as well as time. Chance took him to India, where he took service as a soldier with an Indian prince. (This rings very true to life: many Indian princes employed Arabian mercenaries, notably the Nizam of Hyderabad.)

Over the years in a far country Abu Hassan achieved rank and fame

until he became great in the land. Yet still the memory of his disgrace gnawed at his peace of mind until, determined to satisfy himself that his homeland had, with the years and his fame, forgotten the unfortunate incident of his youth, he travelled thither in disguise as a religious mendicant. Alas! his hope was to remain unfulfilled. Sitting unrecognized at the door of a hut, he heard the voice of a young girl telling her mother that she was to have her horoscope read, and for this purpose needed to know the date of her birth. The mother replied: 'Thou wast born, my daughter, on the same night that Abu Hassan farted.'

Abyan is part of the delta of two wadis, the Hassan (rhymes with fussin') and the Bana (rhymes with gunna), seasonal watercourses rising far back in the hills and debouching into the coastal plain some eighteen miles from the sea. Thence they run parallel, some three to four miles apart, in broad silt-filled courses between tamarisk scrub down to the sea. During the summer months they flood intermittently, and by trapping and leading off the water the area between them is cultivable, the extent varying according to the volume of the flood. As control of the flood water has become more effective over the years, the cultivated area has steadily increased until in the early sixties it stood at about twenty-five thousand acres, tiny by comparison with the wide cotton lands of the Sudan but bountiful by Arabian standards. From an aircraft the outlines of the oasis may clearly be seen, edged about by the desert, the mountains and the sea.

To reach Abyan you drive along the beach, advisedly at low tide, for thirty miles. Thence a track leads inwards, briefly through sour lagoons of salt marsh, and then, past the scattered mud huts of Al Kod, becomes an embanked road between plantations of banana, pawpaw and cotton, where flocks of white egrets stalk in the shallowly flooded fields. The landscape is level and green, varied with tamarisk and acacia, and set against a fine backdrop of dramatic bare hills. In summer it is hot, humid and exceedingly dusty, but on winter afternoons, searching for elusive duck among the flood-pools in the yellow light of late afternoon, when the hills turn blue and magenta, I have experienced rare moments of affection for Arabia.

This was my first parish: I lived in Abyan for two years, from 1952 to 1954, and was happy enough at Zingibar amongst the amiable Fadhli people. They were easy to get along with, relatively sophisti-

cated, their ruling house firmly established, even if the sultan of the time was personally eccentric, and there was plenty of money for development in the state Treasury from cotton and customs dues. Fortune had favoured the Fadhlis, not only in their slice of the fertile delta but by their commanding position astride the sole route into Aden from the north-east. With political federation, the customs revenue was compounded, but Fadhli remains in a state of solvency unusual for a South Arabian principality.

Zingibar in the 1960s is the most advanced and forward-looking town outside Aden, thanks to the prosperity brought by the cotton, the cessation of the age-long guerrilla warfare with neighbouring Yafai and, above all, the enterprise and vigour of a former sultan and my close personal friend, Ahmed bin Abdullah. In spite of the disadvantages of its location, set on a sandy plain, lacking stone for building and any natural amenity of climate and situation, the little town is lively, welcoming and open in a fashion unusual in these parts, where towns and villages tend to be narrow, shuttered and secretive.

It is small, not more than a half-mile diameter of built-up area, although there are brushwood suburbs where live the poorer folk straggling about the fringes. There is a corner-commanding State Secretariat enclosing a tree-filled courtyard, where yellow weaver birds chatter and flutter around their hanging nests; an agreeable mosque, a market for flesh and fish (the fishermen come panting up the dusty track from the sea, bearing tuna and shark from the end of shoulder-borne poles), a fort and a prison. The prison is a model of its kind, white-walled, starkly clean.

My sole objection to Fadhli penal practice was to the custom of shackling prisoners with heavy leg-irons, and I was able to persuade the former Prime Minister to abandon this degrading and mediaeval practice. I noticed that after I left it crept back into use. However, they shackled only murderers; other prisoners were usually debtors or tribal hostages, the latter the consequence of a still valid custom for ensuring the good behaviour, or at least the disinclination to misbehavious, of turbulent clans. For many years the gaoler was an old soldier called Mehdi Bugle, the latter name being not Arabic but indicating his former capacity in the Tribal Guards, that of bugler, like the Welsh occupational eponym 'Jones the Milk'.

The unsurfaced main streets are lined with little stall-type shops, open-fronted, packed with canned goods, soft drinks, transistor radios and other Arabian necessities. Food shops advertise their pungent wares aromatically from large tureens of spiced meat and flavoured rice, curried lentils and wholesome smelling flaps of unleavened bread. There are stands of bicycles for hire, and up-country trade trucks, their drivers sleeping in the shade beneath the wheels, goods and passengers piled high in the open back and goats a-browsing among the banana skins and paper. The men lounge about drinking endless fizzy Colas, sucking at tobacco hookahs made from empty bottles, chewing nuts and sunflower seeds, dressed in waistcloths, undervests or loose shirts, and many wearing light blue turbans, a Fadhli characteristic, tied in near-Indian style. They are an amiable, friendly lot here, and a European stranger is likely to be greeted and handed a Coca-Cola.

Although bore-wells are varying the traditional seasonal patterns and crops, the region is still dependent on the floods of July and August, racing and twisting down the ravines from the rain-hung Yemen highlands. In the plains there is no measurable rainfall whatsoever, and all the present activity and prosperity depends on these floods. Nowadays complex and effective headworks control them, parcelling them out among the channels and canals until the delta is laced as with veins of the precious stuff; but when we were first in Abyan control was less assured, and the advent of a good flood was an occasion for a fine old scurry of excitement, with tractors and bullock-teams and gangs of labourers whizzing in all directions to head off, channel, dam or release the unruly water. At night lanterns flared along channel banks, fields flooded into lakes, and inspectors dashed madly along embankments to prevent farmers diverting water to their own fields. There would be shoutings and arguments as to when and where the next onward breach should be made, as in old battles, with those behind crying 'Forward' and those before crying 'Back'.

The power and fury of the water is unbelievable: it carves through revetted embankments like fire through paper. In one flood we lost our garden, our chicken house, and almost the house as well. Sitting at dinner one evening, we had friends from Aden to stay, happy after Secretariat years to be again up-country. The pressure-lamps hissed

away, the conversation chattered along, the moonless night lapped about the tall mud house. Gradually I became aware of an unfamiliar background noise, distant, constant, faint. Possibly an overloaded lorry struggling in bottom gear through dustdrifts? Through the soup, the fish and the roast the sound swelled, a distant and confused roaring: not at first alarming, until shouts were heard, and the thudding of bare feet in the dust. The guard shouted a question and there was a babble of reply. From the window I called to ask what was happening, and there I could hear more distinctly the unidentified roar, and from the excited men milling about below learned the alarming news. A mile to the north an important earthwork at the wadi edge had collapsed under pressure from an unusually high and violent flood. While the greater volume of the now uncontrollable water was flowing down to the sea, a substantial offshoot was barrelling its way directly towards us.

The sweet, the cheese and the nuts remained uneaten; for the rest of the night we were doing what we could to fend off the flood. While I roared off to the town, my wife and friends remained at the house, directing the servants and the soldiers in the strategic disposition of sandbags. The brown, swift water clawed up to the walls and rose several feet against their mud-brick elevation. Our precious chicken-house, the building of which I had personally supervised, was swept away, but not before Hassan the watchman, waist deep and greatly daring, had rescued the hens. The garden wall crumbled and disappeared and the flower beds, just beginning to mature, vanished for ever. We feared for the foundations of the house, none too deep and of unbaked brick, but they held; ten years later the house still stood. The main streets of Zingibar were not in danger, raised on an elevation composed of the ruins of its past, but the poorer quarters, brushwood shanties and kerosene tins shacks, were threatened, and Tribal Guards, with the villagers, had an arduous night throwing up earthworks to stem the rush of water.

By four in the morning, the stars pale, an old moon making a late traverse of the sky, the waters reached their apogee, lapping against the new banks. There for a breathless hour they remained, seeming unlikely ever to subside, until quietly the flood began to drop. An inch of mud showed, then two; the sideways swirl of the water, back to a harmless flood channel, accelerated. By morning it had disappeared.

House and village were surrounded by pools and gleaming acres of mud. Traffic was at a standstill. Aden was out of reach since the main wadi still ran strongly, a shallow but unruly tide a hundred yards across. On the Aden side we could see lorries and people halted, while in Zingibar the up-country trucks were likewise marooned because the Wadi Hassan ran no less strongly, cutting the Shuqra road to the interior. My Aden friend, required urgently at the Secretariat for important meetings, waded the flood supported by soldiers, while his lady crossed in a chair, insecurely but happily poised above the brown tide, held aloft by four ted-turbanned tribesmen.

From Schlatholt's Bridge over the Bana the road to Jaar slices, straight as a sniping bullet, through banana groves and cotton fields, over culverts and dry canals, to the border between Fadhli and Yafai, at the village of Makhzan. Here, for a month or two each winter, I would get in a few days at the migrating ducks, lying up on the pools left by the late-summer floods. It was poor man's shooting, the birds difficult to reach, the undergrowth tangled, hot and dusty: there were golden-eye and teal, shoveller, and a bird that wasn't quite a mallard. In the flood water, chasing frogs, paced the curious hammer-headed storks, stumpy brown birds with rearward crests which, with heavy bills, resemble somewhat the shape of a mason's hammer.

At Makhzan there is now a successful hospital, originally a joint project between Fadhlis and Yafais. Its siting was an important issue when I arrived in Abyan in 1952, since neither party could agree to the hospital being located anywhere but in its own territory. With others I tramped about the dunes assessing the whys and wherefores of various sites. The phrase is appropriately Gilbertian since the ultimate and Solomon-like decision was to put the coveted institution precisely on the boundary of the two sultanates, one half on each side, equally remote and equally inconvenient for both parties.

If the siting was political nonsense, the hospital itself has been a tremendous success and is a lasting memorial to the late Norman Corkill, a former Health Adviser and one of the few Britons to make a truly enduring contribution to the welfare of the territory. There was no romanticism about Norman Corkill, no wearing of Arab headdress, no talk about political mystique: he simply got on with the job. On the approach to Jaar, a smart new fort and barracks

stands where first I lived in the ruins of the old Husn Khanfar, dodging the bats on the winding, narrow staircase to my bed on the roof and watching the snakes in the crevices of the deep well. Husn Khanfar, taking its name from the whaleback ridge of Khanfar half a mile distant, was a border keep famous in the interminable wars between Fadhli and Yafai. While internecine feuds are endemic in South Arabia, the Fadhli-Yafai row is famous even by the local high standards, distinguished by every kind of skulduggery. There are ancient causes – the Fadhlis have slowly pushed back the Yafais from the coastal districts – but for the past hundred years or so there has been the most fundamental *casus belli*, that of disputed water rights.

Two previous writers on Arabia, Ingrams and Belhaven, have both described how, as beginners in the thirties, they cut their political teeth on the Fadhli-Yafai dispute. Ingrams was handed, at the Aden Secretariat in 1934, 'several large and unpleasant-looking bundles of paper, euphemistically called files' on this famous case. By Belhaven's time, he speaks of 'three massive files' and despite his pleas he was given the task of making a précis, reducing them to three closely written sheets. 'What's it all mean?' asked his superior. 'Practically nothing,' he replied, 'except that the two tribes have one main dispute over a water channel, and a large number of other disputes; the thirty or so officers who have written on these disputes on the file from time to time are agreed on one thing only – there is no way in which any of the disputes can be settled until everyone in the district is dead.' I personally can attest to the continued malignant growth of those files: volumes were still in circulation while I slaved as an Assistant Secretary.

The feud arose from a water channel leading from the Wadi Bana, at that point in Yafai territory, to conduct flood water on to Fadhli lands, into those parts lying north of Al Husn in the border area where live two especially turbulent clans, ostensibly Fadhli, the Ahl Fuleis and the Haidera Mansur. This water channel, known locally as the *nazia*, a natural channel improved by simple digging and controls, was the subject of an agreement between the Fadhlis and the Yafais in 1872, and it was over the honouring of the agreement that a devastating geurrilla war began which by 1939 had reduced the area to wasteland. Sometimes the Yafais, in revenge for a murder, would

obstruct the flow; sometimes the Fadhlis would withhold the agreed royalty payments or dispute their assessment; or the Fadhlis would build a provocative fort or levy unsanctioned customs on goods in transit to Yafai. Watching from the sidelines was the British Residency, giving advice from Aden and occasionally taking a hand in the game by withholding tribal stipends from one or other for breaches of the agreement. In those years British participation in the game was reluctant, although, as Ingrams remarks, 'once or twice there have been quite decent rubbers'.

It is very different today, even since I camped in the snake-haunted ruins of the ancient fort. Today there is tarmac, and a nearby hospital, a power-house, and a school buried in thickets of brilliant oleander. Arab-owned tractors putter about the dusty fields while their owners pelt off to Aden in Japanese jeeps. The transformation is due to the work of a few men and to the 'forward' policy of the British in post-war years.

One name is foremost, that of Brian Hartley, formerly Director of Agriculture. Coming to the Protectorate just before the war, he won the confidence of the tribes and their leaders everywhere. The wasted potential of the Abyan delta was an offence to his eye, and when during the war years the British Government encouraged local food production by grants of money, Hartley obtained agreement from the Yafai and the Fadhli to cultivate an area of Abyan. With the first grant he farmed 700 acres: even yet the tribes squabbled and fought until the British intervened and by force imposed an uneasy peace. After the war a cash crop, long staple Egyptian cotton, was substituted for food production, and with a loan from the British the Abyan Board was set up, with representatives of both states and certain British officials. Heavy machinery and workshops were made available, systematic planning of irrigation was undertaken, foreign engineers and artisans were brought in to survey and train and operate – a polyglot crew of Alexandrian Greeks, Eritrean Italians, displaced Germans, Indian clerks.

These were the mixed bag running the Abyan Board when I reached the district in 1952. Over the years, helped by the prosperity, Fadhlis and Yafais learned to sink their differences, becoming increasingly sophisticated in the management of this far from simple scheme, attending conferences in London and sending delegations to

Liverpool, so that by 1960 the British officials had been eliminated by the all-Arab Board who retained a handful of expatriate technicians.

There are still problems and crises. With regular watering of the delta, with no exciting spates sweeping wasted to the sea – from an aircraft one could see the discoloured discharge of the wadis for miles, red-brown against the peacock Gulf of Aden – the water-table has risen and brought with it salts which render the soil infertile. The problem is familiar in such schemes, the solution complex and requiring seasons of restraint in cultivation. Another problem is the world glut of cotton: Abyan's little crop, although at first of high quality, would be lost in the world's market but for the protection of Commonwealth preference. There is the human tendency among Arab farmers, *nouveaux riches* on one crop, to neglect the refinements of cultivation, saving on labour costs but producing an inferior commodity. But these are the common experience of all such enterprises, and beyond doubt the green delta is outstandingly successful, although I would not care to wager that the ancient feud between the Fadhli and Yafai has yet passed into history.

On the bare limestone ridge of Khanfar Rock are the houses of the Board's European employees, spaced along the crest like broken teeth. From here the delta is revealed, and on a clear day even Aden, looming blue and abrupt forty miles distant. South-east the sea makes a dark line behind the white cluster which is Zingibar: the patchwork of cotton fields, each enclosed by a shallow earth bank, brown or green according to season; the white twisting of the wadis, dry among grey tamarisk thickets; the arrow-straight ribbon of the road, dust-smoking in the wake of invisible landrovers.

Turn about, and you will see Jaar town, clustering buff and grey beyond the set-square fields of the experimental station: more cotton fields, a line of low trees along the bank of a canal. Ten miles beyond, level across fields and hamlets, rise the mountains, quite suddenly, ridge over ridge, bare and treeless, stark, sun-smitten. Fine mountains they are, changing colour with the hour: amber and grey at dawn above thin mists of the plain; at noon, shadowless and blue; and as the sun flares down into Haushabi distances, rose and magenta before the dark.

Jaar means the place of hyenas, and one may still encounter them, eyes glowing red in the headlights, scurrying in their furtive way

about the tracks. It is the principal town and administrative capital of Lower Yafai, but like everything else in South Arabia, the matter is not so simple. There is another capital eight miles away at Al Husn, and a third one, Al Qara, hidden high away among the mountains, where Yafai sultans have, from time immemorial, holed up when affairs in the outside world became too difficult. In Jaar you may notice a difference from Zingibar in the physiognomy of the people. The Yafais are notably pale-skinned, with sallow aquiline features, handsome in a sour way, although not taller or more sturdy than other tribesmen, averaging five feet seven or eight inches and tending to be slightly built. Their turbans are wound high, in black and banded yellow, and they have a particularly chilly and arrogant glance for strangers.

The Yafai sultanate is of great antiquity, dating back to pre-Islamic times, and descended from priest-kings. Even today, in times of drought, the hillmen of Al Haid will direct prayers for rain to their sultan, although, paradoxically, his political power is often challenged. Their tribal god is said to dwell in a drum at Al Qara, the mountain capital, and a 'High Place' in the old pagan sense. No European has seen the drum. The Yafai Sultan, of the house of Affifi (rhymes with 'Rififi'), from which ancestor the tribe takes its name, is the Keeper of the Drum. Like most of South Arabia, Yafai was formerly under the imams of Sana, but established its independence. In 1893 the Turks, then ruling in the Yemen, tried to persuade the sultan to accept Turkish suzerainty, but were warned off by the British. In 1899 the then sultan, annoyed by what he regarded as an inadequate reception by the British on a visit to Aden, retired to sulk at Al Qara, refusing all communication with the Residency. This strikes a familiar chord. I have had dealings with three successive sultans of Lower Yafai and the first two made a practice of disappearing to Al Qara, where they could not be reached, whenever they grew tired of the importunities of the sheikhs of Abyan or of the pesterings of political officers. It remains to be seen whether the third and present sultan, Mohsin bin Aidrus, will continue the family tradition in defiance of what he is being taught at his English public school.

When I reached Abyan in 1952 the sultan was Aidrus bin Mohsin, an elderly, powerful personality who divided his time between Aden

and Al Qara, rarely residing in Abyan where he was unwelcome to the people, who resented his autocratic and grasping ways. It fell to me to put to Aidrus in 1954 the first proposals for the creation of a federation in South Arabia, which was rather like asking a club-class welterweight to go ten rounds with a pro heavyweight. He had a long pale face, a close-clipped moustache, *kohl* rimmed eyes, a handsome yellow silk turban and an Indian-style button-up coat in crimson velvet. Over the coat was an elaborate sash of patterned green silk, in which was enfolded a golden dagger: the Affifi were always rather a dressy lot. It was at this time that a move was made to kill two birds with one stone by installing his eldest son Mohammed as Head of Administration in the Abyan district, thereby restoring the sultan's house to its former authority as well as making more regular the proceedings of the self-governing junta of sheikhs who, with British political supervision, exercised authority.

Mohammed bin Aidrus was every inch a Yafai, sallow, hollow-cheeked, clean shaven, with heavy straight black eyebrows nearly meeting above his bony nose. He was then about twenty-seven or eight and had spent most of his youth at Al Qara, rarely venturing into the outside world. As a result, the natural suspicion of the tribesman had matured into an almost pathological condition in which he trusted no one at all. He did not trust his father, or the fat sheikhs of Abyan over whom he was now to exert authority, or the British advisers, to him as outlandish as men from Mars, or the Fadhlis, ancient enemies of his people with whom he was now expected to sit in council and meetings of the Abyan Board. I felt sorry for him, for all that he was a young man who discouraged close personal relationships.

Within his first year he had to undergo an exciting but bewildering experience. A party of chiefs attended the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in London. He conducted himself throughout with exemplary dignity, in distinction to at least one other member of the sultanic party, a jolly rascal who had the whole party in a tizzy when, on the fateful and meticulously timed day of the coronation, he failed to keep the 6 a.m. rendezvous in the foyer of the Russell Square hotel where the party were lodged. His room had clearly not been slept in. While the other chiefs assembled in all their finery, and two harassed political officers put calls out all over London to locate the

miscreant he turned up among them, stumbling through the hotel doors, turban awry, dark rings under his eyes, and every traditional sign of having been on the tiles. Black coffee and a quick change of clothes restored him in time to take his place on the stands outside Westminster Abbey. He is now dead, and I liked him very much.

Such goings-on were not for the Yafai: dressed antiquely in his velvet coat he comported himself with the greatest dignity. There were great feastings on his return to Al Husn – in those unsophisticated years the arrivals and departures of rulers were occasions for great fantasias, with flagged arches across the streets and much firing of volleys – and I clambered with him between ranks of chanting and cheering tribesmen up the steep tor to his tall stone house.

At the ceremonious meal which followed, as we sat on the floor against bright cushions, he gazed through the low windows to the desert and the barren hills, and I could see a question forming in his mind, something really puzzling him. Turning to me – there was no other European present – he said, 'Ya, Mr. Foster, tell me – tell me truthfully – why do you and the other English come here to work?' I made some non-committal reply: it was a question not easily answered by an official of a colonial power, and I asked him what had prompted it. 'Well,' he said, 'I don't understand. I've seen your country now. I've seen so many strange things that I could never have dreamed of, cities so big that one could spend all one's life without knowing all the people, full of cars and great houses. I have seen the fields there, and the grass, and the many, many fine trees. I have seen that the cattle and the horses and the sheep are fat and nearly double the size of ours.' (The party had been taken to an agricultural show.) 'With all this, tell me, why do you come here to work? Here, where it is too hot, and too much dust, and there is no grass as you have in London' (London is frequently used to mean Britain) 'and no great houses, and no proper roads. Why,' he gazed at me from under his thick black eyebrows, without irony or sarcasm but genuinely wondering, 'why do you come here?'

It was the nearest I approached to a warm personal relationship with this austere and rigid young ruler. A few years later his relationship with the sheikhs of Abyan had deteriorated, his confidence in British advisers had been lost and, influenced perhaps by the tide of hostile propaganda sweeping the Middle East from Egypt, he

decamped, in the manner traditional to his family, to the hills of Al Qara taking with him the State Army and as much of the funds as he could find in the cupboard at the Treasury. Thence he defied authority and allied himself with other refugee dissidents in the Yemen, crossing regularly the uncovered, remote mountain frontier.

He was succeeded by his young brother Mohsin, a boy, whose 'coronation' I attended at Al Husn in 1960. He was then about twelve years old, but bore himself with all the Affifi composure during the ceremonial binding of his sultanic turban before a great gathering of tribesmen and Europeans from Aden. There were the customary jollifications, parades of soldiers and, a more recent innovation, of school children, of tribesmen chanting impromptu panegyrics in praise of the sultan and firing their rifles as they circled in a dusty crocodile before the dais, and of camelmen dashing about at top speed on their gangling mounts, heels thumping into tawny flanks, hooked camel sticks waving, soft padded feet prodded into astonishing bursts of speed. (Those who know only the soft pad of camels at the zoo would be surprised to see the speed and *élan* of a well-bred riding-camel.)

The climax was a fly-over of the Royal Air Force from Aden, but there was an embarrassing hitch in the programme and we sat sweltering under the afternoon sun for a long twenty minutes before the first slow Beverleys lumbered up from Aden. The performance ended with the slaughtering for a feast of twenty cattle in a line, their throats cut, the blood spilling gruesomely into the dust.

From the tor at Al Husn you look across several miles of plain, covered for the most part in coarse grass, poor grazing despite its verdure, towards the sudden foot of the mountains six or seven miles off. There are villages here and there, and the tor of Halima (rhymes with jelly-ma), scene of skirmishes in the Yafai-versus-Fadhli feud as recently as the late thirties.

Across from Halima is Dirjaj, a huddle of pale terracotta towers beside the Wadi Hassan, where live the turbulent clan of Haidera Mansur, ostensibly under the Fadhli Sultan, but traditionally open to offers from anybody else, notably from adjacent Yafai. I was friendly with the headman of the clan, Sheikh Mohsin Mohammed, a round-faced cheerful man in his middle thirties, and often visited his

very dirty village, where, despite the evidence of the fertile fields of cotton, wealth was still hidden from the sight of prying eyes.

I had a bad ten minutes at Dirjaj when, as a very new officer, I was cross-questioned by no less a figure than His Excellency the Governor as to the population, occupations, tax revenue and so on of Dirjaj. This was in full durbar, squatting crosslegged around the walls of the sheikh's reception chamber, fanning the myriad flies away at the end of a long and tiring gubernatorial tour. The Dirjajis complained to the governor volubly, noisily, that they should have a health clinic of their own, right in the village, and not be required to walk across to Jaar, four miles away. Since the ratio of clinics to square mileage through the Protectorate was astronomically disparate, their complaint was frivolous – there were great tracts of country in which the sick would have travelled forty or a hundred miles, thinking nothing of it, to reach medical attention. Yet here were the Haidera Mansur complaining bitterly at the distance of a hospital which, even by the standards of the British Health Service, was practically on their doorstep. At all events, the peppery governor grilled me fiercely as to why no clinic had been provided in Dirjaj.

Beyond Dirjaj and the white bed of the Wadi Hassan, beyond the irrigation headworks at Bateis where brown hammerhead storks jerk about after frogs among the pools, beyond the long valley of Yeramis – lovely name for a picturesque but exceedingly hot cleft in the hills – lie the mountains of Yafai al Haid, harsh, sun-stricken, rising abruptly from the coastal plain in a tangle of bare rock slashed with sharp ravines. Yet for all its starkness Al Haid is surprisingly populated. The upper valleys are terraced in demilunes where coffee and millet are grown, and towered villages perch on defensible outcrops.

The British have remained aloof from Al Haid: it has scarcely been visited by any European, although Governor Hickinbotham made his way to Al Qara in 1951. The last foreign visitors were as long ago as 1954, when David Treffry, a brilliant and unusual Political Officer, was sent there on a brief mission accompanied by an intrepid Bengali doctor, puffing and panting in pure Peter Sellers Anglo-Indian, 'My Gard, terrible fellows these Yafais! Are not knowing arts of peace or pulling on together.' Dear Dr Sen Gupta, so far from lush Bengal. He did much for these arrogant, dirty and

ignorant people, who rapaciously accepted his medicking and despised him at the same time.

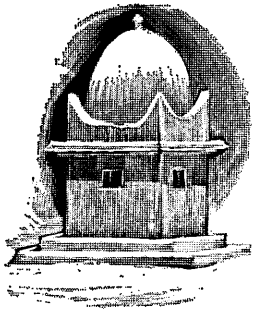
The visit will probably remain the last by outsiders for many years to come. For Al Haid repels intruders: here at their cliff-top capital – it is but a village – of Al Qara, successive sultans of Lower Yafai have rusticated when things got too difficult down below. Did the British Resident fail to dole out the customary gift of rifles? Then ho! for al Qara! Did the Fadhlis knock down Husn Khanfar? Away to the hills, men! Do the cotton-rich men of the plain reject your authority? Then off to Al Qara, O Mohammed Aidrus! And don't forget to take the cash from the Treasury before you go!

Certainly Al Qara has proved an effective refuge. Mohammed Aidrus fled there in 1956, and remained there, with periodic visits to the Yemen for fresh handouts of arms and money. The Federation, through the British Agency, made a determined effort to unseat him in 1961, and for six months I conducted a war on my own, acting in an unfamiliar capacity as deputy for political matters to the British Agent. I held morning intelligence meetings with political, military and R.A.F. representatives, peered over air photographs with the aid of a magnifying glass and up-country tribesmen who claimed to know these unmapped localities, ordered sorties of Shackleton bombers over Al Qara, and arranged parachute drops of arms to beleaguered supporters. Improbably in my recollection, I even addressed the pilots of the squadron in a political briefing at their Operations Room – an unreal film-sequence in my life with echoes of *Twelve O'clock High* – the crews remarkably young in zipped blue flying suits and myself with a blackboard and a pointer giving out the 'target for tonight'.

If I appear facetious about a serious matter, I can plead only that even death and war in South Arabia frequently assume aspects of farce. In any case, the bombing was designed more as an irritant than anything else. We hoped that the necessity for the tribesmen to take refuge in caves, greatly to their discomfort, would induce them to force Mohammed Aidrus to leave Al Qara and retire to the Yemen, where he would have been much less effective. However, events precluded the testing of the theory to success, since the Kuwait crisis of June 1961 forced us to call off the operation. My guess is that far more severe pressures, bigger bombs more frequently, would have

been required. Throughout Britain's brief period in South Arabia, Al Haid remained unconquered and hostile, its valleys alive with vigorous, arrogant Yafais.

Beyond Al Haid lies the even more remote country of Upper Yafai, a land of petty chiefs rejoicing in titles like the Busi Sheikh, the Hadhrami Sheikh, the Maflahi Sheikh and, best of all, a family of rascals known collectively as the Nakeebs of Mausatta, surely a title for a Middle Eastern operetta? I had great fun with these impoverished hedge-barons, for they would wheedle endlessly for ever larger handouts of rifles, playing a game of procrastination which both sides understood to a nicety. But there were troubles in Upper Yafai too, and once I flew in a Shackleton bomber over that disturbed landscape with the Emir Haddar, trying to separate the sheep (his friends) from the goats (his foes). Since the land is thick with villages, bare, treeless upland among tors and outcrops, hemmed about with staggering gorges, with friend and foe closely mixed, the task was difficult, and one had always to discount a percentage of Haddar's information as being biased. John Davis, commanding the R.A.F. at Khormaksar, gave us a splendid lunch on our return.



A drinking-fountain, Hadhramaut

CHAPTER VIII

HADHRAMAUT

For six hours we had bumped across the *jol* (rhymes with pole), a stone wilderness, a limestone steppe five thousand feet high, an immensity of light and infinite distances tilted under the blue-white sky, paling at the horizons where, eastwards, cloud-heads showed over the distant Gulf of Aden. No life moved on the *jol*. Small secret hawks twisted low among the rocks, hunting for lizards. We had left the last Beduin among the gorges between Mukalla and this wilderness, a skein of them, dark blue indigo men driving a great herd of camels, a tufted brown undulation of legs and necks. Our truck nosed meekly past and lurched out of the hills on to the terrible bare upland of the *jol*. There it was light and light and light, a dead brightness, white in all angles, beating down only to be thrown up again from the bare rock. No trees were there, only sagebrush and thorns among the stones. It rolled west without a check, flat-topped mesas breaking the line of the slow ridges. Behind us the line was clear-cut, it dropped away into immensity, across sixty miles of gorges to the hidden sea. Southwards, behind the receding planes of the *jol*, dim peaks smouldered blue.

We went against the sun, swinging round on our left hand until it lay yellow hard in our eyes. I was sore and tired from the bumping and jolting; the cab of the truck was uncomfortable, with room for three, so that Charles Inge (now Intelligence Officer at Mukalla) and I had to take turns in the middle seat, which was worst of all because there was nothing to hold on to. Mohammed, the driver, hung grimly to the steering wheel. Throughout the day we ate sandwiches, which grew warmer and drier as time passed, and slaked our thirst from the canvas water-container which hung outside the cab. The water kept cool, by evaporation, but tasted odd.

As the light failed it seemed as though we would never reach the end of the *jol*. Each loop of the road, round some flat-topped hill, would curve back round again until it seemed that we were circling, doomed to eternity to jolt endlessly in the twilight on this stony South Arabian upland. Charles was anxious to reach the Hadhramaut Valley before it grew dark, since the descent into the great wadi falls abruptly over fifteen hundred feet of cliff, perilous to descend even in daylight.

As the sun touched the edge of the earth in a display of almost vulgar magnificence (the utter silence saved it from a cinemesque finale) and the long cloud of white dust lolling a mile astern of our wheels turned Turner *Téméraire* golden, we saw before us, over the next ridge-line, catching the last of the sun, the top edge of a line of cliffs. I was not prepared for the plunging suddenness, the sheer drop of the gulf upon which we gazed in failing light. The upper part of the cliff facing us still held the red light of the day; but below, the gorge fell sheer a thousand feet into deepening shadow, amethyst and violet and indigo, and further, out of eye-range, into darkness at the bottom.

The descent was paralysing, the track zigging crazily down the dark wall of the canyon, the bends so narrow that the truck had to stop, reverse and edge forward again before clearing round them. Charles made us get out and walk at these places, myself carrying the tin with the sad relics of the sandwiches, mouth dry with dust and too many cigarettes. I thought it a bit hard on Mohammed to abandon him while he manoeuvred over the dangerous places. Ali, the driver's aide, ran to place stones under the wheels at appropriate moments.

Dim yellow light pricked the blackness at the foot of the escarpment, beside a suspicion of date-palms. Charles presented his letter

of introduction to the Beduin soldier at the check-post. It was by now quite dark; hurricane lanterns were brought and the corporal of the guard appeared. He opened the letter and read it slowly, mouthing the words over to himself once, twice, three times. When the words were familiar, he set about interpreting the meaning of them. He was a handsome Bedui boy, and had learned to read only a year or so before joining the tribal guards. The letter commended to his care Charles and myself, and directed him to guide us to the rest house in the nearest village. When he had understood this, a broad smile illuminated his dark (and truly rather dirty) face, and we had to go again through the ritual of greeting.

'May the evening be good.'

'May the evening be bright.'

'How are you? How are you? Are you well?'

'And how are you? Is it good? Is everything well?'

'Praise be to God, everything is well.'

'Praise be to God.'

Alas, that was not the end of it, although I ached for my bed. The soldiers were newly posted to the area, and did not know where the rest house lay, nor in which of the many hamlets it might be situated. Tired as we were, we had to endure another hour of jolting – it was ten hours since we had left Mukalla – among great stones in the bed of the Wadi Duan and twisting among date-groves, with false starts and irritating retracings of our road. There are no street-lamps in the valley; indeed, no proper roads in the outlying branches of it, in one of which we now lay, and after dark only jackals and evildoers are abroad. Then, too, the valleys are confusing, they run one into another, broaden and narrow, hamlets and villages dot their sides, one looking much like another. There was cause for our guide's uncertainty. When detailed for the job he had expostulated with the corporal (discipline among Beduin troops is not of the same stuff as in the Brigade of Guards) that he did not know the way and also, if he took us to the rest house, riding in our truck, he would have to spend the night with us away from his cot and supper, or else have the long walk home.

At last we found the village where the rest house lay. Next we traced the house of the man who held the key to the rest house. Then we found the house of the man to whom the rest house key-keeper

had gone for supper. Finally, we found and obtained entrance to the rest house itself. All this in a 15-cwt. truck, in the darkness, through the pinched alleys of a strange Arab village, at the end of a ten-hour trek.

We set up our camp-beds on the verandah of the first floor. Charles handed me a peg of whisky, while Mohammed and Ali pumped up the pressure-lamp and the primus stove. Charles's wife had packed for our first night a splendid supper, all kinds of tinned luxuries, and the proper tools to open, cook and eat them with. We could not face it. We supped off lukewarm tinned soup, eaten from the can, one spoon between the two of us.

I could see across the valley to where the level line of the cliffs cut across the stars – an arc of darkness defined against paleness, growing, widening, every indentation of the cliff-edge cut from steel. The moon, one night off full, already high in the sky, slipped above the cliff and threw the valley into light and shadow.

Morning revealed the nature and extent of the valley, one of the side valleys of the main Wadi Hadhramaut. At this point it was narrow, perhaps a mile wide, edged with 1500 foot cliffs on either side. All these valleys are sliced knife-like out of the high *jol*, falling in two sheer steps connected by a sloping scree to the valley floor. The cliffs are reddish-brown in colour, changing with the light; at morning and evening crimson and madder, at noon blanching shadowless to fawn and dust. The opposing walls of the valleys do not correspond, but swing forward and back independently of each other, so that it is difficult at any one time to identify the general direction of the valleys. The series of bluffs has the further effect of closing to view the ends of the valleys, so that one moves as though in an enclosed plain with no outlet. As the track winds on, new distances open ahead and close in behind. For minutes it will appear that there is no through way in the direction one travels, until the next corner is turned and new traverses are revealed.

The village lay half a mile from the rest house, houses built of red-brown mud, picked out along the roof-tops in white, each one four or five storeys high, buttressed and pinnacled, close-piled one against and above the other, huddled mediaeval at the foot of the towering cliffs. The sharp right angles of the many coigns and buttresses were in sharp relief in the morning sun. A tapering white

minaret, an inverted ice-cream cone, broke the pattern of right-angular brown. This, my first sight of a Hadhrami village, remains an indelible picture in my mind, and bears out the praise lavished by earlier travellers. It seems that the Hadhramis have a natural eye for house building and, more important, for a site, instinctively relating the house to its environment, and building in a vigorous, distinctive and indigenous style. Nowhere in the world are there high mud houses like these. They have flat roofs, hidden behind parapets ornamented with pinnacles (the pinnacles, oddly enough, reappear in the Muslim architecture of Northern Nigeria) and edged with whitewash in contrast to the red-brown of the lower part of the building.

The floor of the valley was cultivated on either side of the stone-filled wadi-bed, little fields divided by low banks of earth, now flushed with the green of young corn – the month was December. Date-palms edged the fields and the sides of the valley.

We breakfasted grimly on fat-rimed tinned ham, dry bread and orange juice – Charles thought it not worth bothering to do more – and set off towards the main valley over an exceedingly arduous track lying through the boulders of the dry torrent-bed. Mohammed wrenched and pulled at the steering wheel, Charles and I endured the front seat with no great stoicism, and in the back of the truck Ali, the driver's help, clung impassively among the forty-gallon drums of petrol and water, the camp beds and kit boxes.

We reached the main valley at noon, not suddenly, but gradually aware that on our left hand the valley wall had curved back and away from us. At this point we were at the extreme western end of the main valley, where the cliff walls draw apart and the valley loses itself in the desert. The illusion of a running out, an end, of finality, is convincing. The cliffs curve away back on themselves, and westwards the yellow sand, in low dunes, runs on and on into a dim whiteness. That way lies the Ramlat es Sabatein, a corner of the Empty Quarter of South Arabia, one of the world's greatest wildernesses, and as we paused, eyes narrowed against the glare of the white dunes and the sun overhead, we could sense the awesome desolation, the empty miles that run far up into Arabia and eastwards across to the Persian Gulf.

We turned our back on the desert and headed down the main valley, here some six or seven miles wide, with little cultivation and

drier than we would find farther on where the main centres of population are grouped. A landrover roared over low dunes towards us, windscreen down, without a canopy, festooned with dripping goatskin water bags. Crouched behind the wheel, muffled against the dust with an Arab head-cloth over his head and mouth, was a young English irrigation engineer, off to work at a bore-well site. We stopped to exchange greetings, after the fashion of men in lonely places. He was off for three weeks, accompanied by a soldier and a servant. In that time he would see no other European, would speak no word save in Arabic. He would sleep on the sand, in the open, and would eat rough Arab food. He appeared enthusiastic about his work, and drove on after we had smoked a cigarette with him.

Slowly the cultivation increased, although everywhere it was patchy and drifts of dune would intrude among the fields. The road skirted the southern cliffs, passing villages clustered at the foot, each as striking in appearance and siting as the first I had seen. The older houses were starker, more fortress-like than the more recent, they had projecting corner towers, round in one area, square in the next, and fewer windows. I later found that these large houses were not well planned inside, for all their striking exteriors. They are a jumble of small rooms and wasted landings – the size of the rooms being conditioned by the availability of long timbers, a rare commodity in these parts. The ground floor is often given over to a grain store, whence narrow dark staircases lead up to the living quarters and guest-rooms. Women, who, except for the poor and those of slave origin, observe purdah, take the air in rooftop courtyards, behind high parapets.

As the sun swung behind us at mid-afternoon, we came in sight of the first of the three great cities of the valley, Shibam. It is the most striking of them all in appearance; for its tall houses, seven and eight storeys high, are jam-packed together on a mound in the middle of the valley, with no break between them, the town sharp-edged and defined, rising like Ailsa Craig from the valley floor, roof-edges whitened as an island with guano. The sheerness of the walls of the town, the uniformity of height of the tall houses (by order of the town council, to prevent the rooftops, the walking-out place of the women, from being overlooked by neighbouring houses) and their crowding

on to this small knoll combine to present an unforgettable picture, an Arabian Manhattan.

Within the walls the town has little to commend it, the narrow alleyways between the houses being dark and malodorous, fouled by the drainage of each house running down the walls to the street from pipes and gutters. There is a gate to the town on the southern side, a plaster creation in the style of Victorian Bombay, approached by a steep ramp or glacis. Beyond the old town are the modern suburbs of the wealthy, large plaster villas each set in its own date-grove, in a variety of styles, curlicued Hyderabad, smooth Malayan, modified traditional, in white and lemon and pink plaster. It is part of the charm of the Hadhramaut that the indigenous building tradition has continually been enriched by influences from outside, notably from India, Java and Sumatra.

The people of this remote Arabian valley have been great travellers, and communities of them have settled and acquired great wealth abroad, especially in Singapore and the East Indies. There, as merchants, they grew rich, sending fat remittances – and Malayan concubines – back to their homeland, and ultimately returning there to retire. Immense wealth accrued in this way, and each retired nabob built for himself the largest and most extravagant house he could afford. Native Hadhrami workmen had craft enough to absorb new styles and to carry out the extravaganzas of the wealthy men returned from abroad, and the three cities of the valley – Shibam, Saiun and Tarim – are set about with fine buildings.

Our journey ended at Saiun, in just such a large villa, the residence of the Political Officer. Saiun is the most agreeable of the cities; it lies close under the cliff of the southern wall of the valley, looking across to the north wall some six miles away. The houses pile up in agreeable story-book fashion under the red cliff, mud-brown relieved by white parapets, angular houses varied with tapering mosques. On the northern edge of the town, before the date-gardens, dominating the town square, tropically mediaeval, is the palace of the Kathiri Sultan, six storeys high, its core a great keep the size of London's White Tower, its walls leaning slightly inwards towards the top, with round corner towers. It stands high on a mound, surmounting a plinth of tiered walls and terraces, gleaming white picked out in blue. Lines of deep, small windows space out the walls from top to bottom, and at

the ornate plaster gateway a Kathiri Beduin soldier, in black-and-white checkered headcloth, leans on his rifle.

Below the palace is the square, lined with single-storey shops, with a lorry park and a meat market. The town itself is a maze of alleys, alternatively dark and bright, twisting between the tall houses, and surprisingly clean. Chicken-coops hang fastened to upstairs walls or are suspended on cords hung across the streets, out of reach of cats. Many of the doorways are elaborately carved and panelled, set in Moorish arches, often large double gates with a small postern door let into them. Windows are masked with wooden screens, carved and fretted in Moorish patterns.

On one side of the square is an area of mosques and graveyards and the tombs of holy men, these last being commonly in the form of a square structure with a towering egg-shaped dome mounted above it, pargeted and pinnacled and fretted. White is the prevailing colour, and the buildings are dazzling in the sun; doorways are often picked out in blue. The variety of mosque architecture is an agreeable feature of the valley; the most common is the rectangular courtyard within a cloister, a cone-shaped minaret at one corner, a tapering open-work tower in blue and white. Variants are common; some of the most recent have, in place of the traditional minaret, two small campanile-like lanterns of slim columns at each end of the building, like the belfries of churches in the Lebanon. Entrances are often elaborate, with porticoes, pilasters, double columns and plaster ornamentation. Fretted, trellis-like patterns are common, in bands round the domes, or in walls, admitting an agreeable dappled light into the cool interiors.

The people of the town are as varied as in any town of comparable size elsewhere: there are craftsmen, traders, artisans, rich and poor, farmers and landless labourers. There are no slaves now, officially, but there are many former slaves, of Negro origin, whose lot remains much as it was before – that is to say, not at all bad. They are often more like family retainers, and live as part of the household of their owner. In dress the people are not distinguished, in common with the rest of Southern Arabia, which has never developed a local costume of any style. Imported fashions are adopted by the wealthier – the headrope and cloth of Northern and Central Arabia, turbans tied in Indian style, Pakistani fur hats, an occasional tarbush.

Labourers in the fields wear a loincloth of checked cloth, kilted above the knee, with a vest or shirt of European manufacture. Town-dwellers wear the loincloth to ankle length, often with a white cotton skullcap and a coloured shawl over the shoulders. There are social and local distinctions in dress too; the women of a certain class in Saiun wear a rust-red mantle over their black, while in Shibam another class affects a madonna-blue robe.

On my first evening at Saiun I was invited to a celebration given by the Kathiri Army (strength 124 all ranks) to honour the appointment of a new State Secretary, the head of the Kathiri Administration under the sultan. The new man was a thin-faced Sudani, Sheikh Amin, whom I had met previously in Aden, and he welcomed me warmly and bade me sit beside him in the long white barrack-room, lit by hissing pressure-lamps, where the feast was to be held. We reclined against cushions placed round the walls of the room, and, when that space was filled, overflowed into groups leaning against pillars down the centre. After glasses of milkless sweet tea, soldiers brought the food and laid it out upon the floor. I talked with Sheikh Amin, the most courteous and genial of hosts, until he was drawn into one of the whispered confidential conversations dear to the hearts of all Arabs. It is one of their most common traits – the desire to be seen, at any gathering, making whispered conversation with the most important person present.

As a Political Officer in the Western Aden Protectorate (the Hadhramaut is in the Eastern Protectorate) I continually experienced this – no lunch party could go by without my being drawn aside, not once but many times, by men who wished to whisper into my ear or, rather, wished to be seen whispering into my ear. The longer the conversation could be sustained the greater the prestige of the whisperer. I acquired a technique for dealing with this social menace; for my Arabic, although serviceable enough for conversation, could rarely follow the hissed sibilances of one talking from behind his hand into my very ear. I would look grave, nodding sagely at intervals, interjecting non-committal phrases at what I hoped were appropriate points – 'You speak truly' or 'Certainly' or 'By God, is that so?' – and ask my informant to come to my office, where I could be sure at least of hearing what was said.

Into such whispered importances was Sheikh Amin drawn on this

night, and I made politely to ignore such as I might overhear. My neighbour on my left hand was an elderly Sayyid, one of the great number of such Sayyids in the valley, persons allegedly deriving their descent from the Prophet Mohammed and enjoying a privileged position in the community. They have a reputation for learning and for sanctity, and have in the past wielded enormous influence in these parts, an influence now declining as the machinery of State government is strengthened and traditional rights and duties are exercised by State officials. The Sayyids have not been exclusively an influence for good; they are ultra-conservative, reactionary, opposing all change as inherently undesirable (and as a threat to their own authority). However, my neighbour at supper exhibited no trace of bigotry, but revealed himself as widely travelled; we discussed amiably places in Indonesia known to both of us. It was odd to recall lush-green places, swamps and jungles and steamy grey Sumatran river-ports with this grave Arab, here in the dry air of the parched desert valley.

After supper we climbed to the flat roof of the building to watch a display of night-firing by the soldiers. Verey lights burst white in the darkness, and for seconds the cliffs were lit up, black shadows sliding upwards as the flares slowly declined, rifles and machine-guns chattering. The targets were brought back for our inspection, properly riddled with bullet-holes.

On the road to Tarim we halted beside reapers in a field. They cut the grain – stunted millet – with curved saw-edged knives. The men wore green-and-white check loin-cloths, the women dusty ragged black, covering their heads, shapeless, like women in early Flemish paintings. Two of them wore tall witch-hats of plaited straw against the sun, the crown of the hat very high, on top of their black head-cloths. They squatted on their hunkers to cut the millet – it looked a slow business. Grey swifts flew and swooped about the field, hawking the flies and insects disturbed by the reaping. A broken-down lorry stood beside the road, the driver asleep under it. We had passed his assistant some miles back, heading for distant Saiun on foot, carrying what appeared to be the crankshaft.

Along the roads of the valley are drinking-fountains, *saqqayyah*, little shrine-like constructions of white plaster, seven or eight feet high and four or five feet square. A trellis of open-work half way up is where the traveller takes the cup – usually an old fruit tin –

thrusts it through the trellis into the interior of the shrine where stands a tall pitcher of water, and so obtains for himself a cool drink on these hot and dusty roads. They are often the object of charitable endowment, the wealthy man erecting one on the roadside that borders his property and arranging for it to be replenished by his servants. It is a charming custom, a refreshment to the traveller (most often on foot in these parts), a charitable satisfaction to the man who built it (who thereby discharges one of the five duties of Islam, that of charity) and an opportunity for the Hadhrami masons to display their craft and style.

At Tarim we supped with a leading member of one of the great families of the valley, a family of great wealth in Singapore and Java, one which had played a leading part in the pacification of the valley in the thirties. The mansion was modern, stark white plaster pricked out in green and pink, ornamented with pillars and pilasters and curlicues like a wedding cake, with wrought-iron balustrades in each of the six balconied storeys. A splendidly proportioned stairway led from the entrance up to the first floor. It was ruined by the scatter of goat dung that cascaded down it, by the squashed tomatoes that dirtied it and by the toothless old crone, a bundle of dusty black rags, that sat on it. It was lit by a high window of coloured glass, terrible patterns of terrible colours, of the sort one sees in the hallways of Victorian boarding houses. We kicked off our shoes among a litter of others outside the reception room and entered.

The only furniture in the room was a hat-stand like those seen in London restaurants, dark oak, with curly hooks for bowler hats and subordinate knobs for umbrellas. It most probably came into this remote valley as do most things, by camel caravan, and it was food for thought – the image of the romantic camel-train winding through the savage ranges from the coast with a load of hat-stands. We sat on the floor, on polished linoleum, of which three different patterns were used. I sat on a green piece with a border of pink roses, and reclined on one elbow against a purple cushion; the neighbouring sector was chocolate, with parquet patterning. On the cream-washed walls hung a picture of Nasser shaking hands with Nehru, two Koranic texts in the style of Lahore 1900, and a misty Japanese print framed in electric-blue chromium. From the high ceiling hung a gigantic pressure-lamp, the size of a street-lamp. It could be raised or lowered

by a rope which slanted down to a staple on one wall. From a radio standing in one corner rasped the harsh Arabic of Cairo. In another corner a black negroid fellow, obviously of slave stock, fiddled with a primus stove to make tea. Puddles of tea lay sadly around him.

Our host was charming, and we supped splendidly from a great variety of dishes laid on a cloth in the middle of the floor. All the dishes were set out at the same time, and when they were ready we sat ourselves round the cloth. Before eating we had laved our hands with water brought by a servant, and at the commencement of the meal the Arabs murmured, almost inaudibly, 'Bismallah' – 'In the name of God', the universal pious phrase used at the outset of anything and everything: a meal, a journey, before sitting down or when entering a house. There were bowls of chicken soup, enormous round trays of rice supporting joints of mutton, plates of red, spiced gravy with peas and potatoes steeped in it, bowls of peppered tomato purée, enamel dishes of tinned fruit, flaps of Arab bread. We ate with the right hand only, as is the custom. My host cut out several choice pieces from the sheep and passed them to me – the tender meat from along the ridge of the back, close against the backbone, the kidneys with the fat still clinging to them. I cannot claim to have experienced the privilege of being offered the sheep's eye as a delicacy, as has been recounted by many travellers in Arabia. Indeed, I never once saw this done in my several years in the Aden Protectorate; possibly it is the custom in other parts of Arabia. Afterwards, when we had again rinsed our hands in the ewer brought by the servant, we drank sweet, milkless tea from tiny glass tankards, poured by the slave from a blue enamel dish.

Such social occasions are wholly delightful, a reward to those living and working in the generally harsh conditions of South Arabia; for with educated Arabs, as with the most backwoods Beduin, perfect manners and courtesy, coupled with a lively sense of tradition and of their own worth, make social intercourse, conversation and discussion a real pleasure.

We drove back to Saiun under the blue night sky, the stars very bright, Orion stretching up into the zenith from behind the cliffs. It was exceedingly cold, and we were thankful for the duffel coats and the carriage-rug which we had brought.

After a stay of a week I had to leave this strange and fascinating

valley, and I drove to the airfield to catch the plane back to Aden. It lay east of Saiun, and for the last time I rattled through the selvedge of villages along the southern cliffs, through the brown angular houses, past the white mosques, under the green shade of date-palms and past wind-scoured clumps of tamarisk. The wheat, emerald green, was an inch or two higher than it had been on my arrival. Water chased along little channels to the rhythm of the pumping engines, clear, cool water from the deep wells. Pairs of oxen trod slowly ahead of wooden ploughs. Green-blue bee-eaters perched by the roadside, slivers of turquoise and jade, turning in the sharp, clear sunlight with a flash of bronze iridescence. We slowed to pass a herd of Beduin-driven camels, the men dark and wild, with shoulder-length hair bound by a cord about their foreheads, each with a dagger at his waist.

The Dakota carried me away, flying the length of the valley at cliff-top height, over Saiun and spectacular Shibam; then it wheeled, leaving the great rift behind us, soon lost to sight in the heat haze.

An Arabian oryx

CHAPTER IX

THE YEMEN

The Political Background

In preceding chapters the reader has glimpsed that difficult neighbour to South Arabia, the Yemen, a pervasive presence from Steamer Point to Beihan. It is time therefore to resume briefly the political story and to sketch the background to the echoes of gunfire which he has heard at Dhala, and will hear again elsewhere.

Aden, Lahej and some, but not all, of the other states of the Western Protectorate at one time formed part of the historic Yemen. As already recounted, Lahej and Dhala proclaimed themselves independent of the Yemen during the eighteenth century, and others about the same time, and by the time that the Turks made their second conquest of the Yemen in the nineteenth century, Great Britain was established as the Protecting Power of the small sultanates and sheikhdoms of the south. The Turks made a half-hearted thrust into Dhala in 1872 but were persuaded to withdraw without fighting, and by 1914 were prepared to recognize the separation of the southern districts, in fact if not in law. An Anglo-Turkish Boundary Commission worked its way along the mountains from Perim to beyond Dhala and agreed that although there might be claims it was better to have a useful working frontier-line than endless bickering: the

Anglo-Turkish Convention of March 1914 embodied the agreement.

The defeat of the Turkish Empire resulted in independence for the Yemen under its dominant political-religious group, the Zeidis, led by the Imam. As a successor state to the defunct Turkish Empire, the Yemen should have regarded itself as bound to observe the Convention, but this the Imam declined to do, and revived the claim of his unpopular house to rule over the southern regions.

The Zeidis are a sect of the Shiah, one of the two great divisions of Islam, and occupy the central highlands of the Yemen. They are unpopular with the inhabitants of the southern Yemen, who belong to the Shafai, a sect of the opposite branch of Islam, the Sunni, as do the people of the former Protectorate. It was Zeidi insurrection and intransigence which had defeated the Turks in their first conquest of the Yemen in the seventeenth century.

The Yemeni claim to what it refers to as its southern provinces is based not precisely on that distant occupation but on a mystical, evasive, yet positive concept of the unity of the region and of the Zeidi 'Divine Right' to rule over it. It is not especially anti-British, or anti-Western: rather it is simply pro-Zeidi. The claim has been well defined in Harold Ingrams' *The Yemen**:

> The Imam's attitude stemmed from his religious conviction that all al-Yemen must be under Zeidi rule. To Yahya (first imam of independent Yemen after the First World War) this was a matter of faith. The Prophet had been commissioned by God himself to rule the Muslims and it was the Prophet who, as divine commissioner, had sent his nephew and son-in-law Ali ibn abi Talib to restore order and establish government in al-Yemen. Since, in the Shiite (i.e. Shiah) faith, only the descendants of the Prophet through Fatima his daughter and Ali were his lawful successors to the imamate, there could be no question of any other lawful ruler. History has shown the divine will in action. Since the Zeidi Imamate had been established at Sada in 885 it had survived all vicissitudes and emerged at last triumphant. Under Qasim the Great and his sons, Imam Yahya claimed, the divine ordinance had been fulfilled and the Imamate extended over all al-Yemen. His own father had recovered much of its power (i.e. from the Turks)

*John Murray, 1963

and now, with the invaders gone, it was his own mission to see that the divine decree manifested by 'a thousand years' possession', a phrase which was often on his lips, was acknowledged in those parts of al-Yemen, Aden and its western hinterland, by the British occupiers. These were not ideas which western minds could easily assimilate. Moreover, his interpretation of the bounds of al-Yemen clashed not only with the political ideas of the British, but also with those of neighbouring Arab rulers, King Ibn Saud, and the Protectorate chiefs who had freed themselves from the Zeidis.

Imprecise and unsatisfactory though this may appear, yet it is the basis of the Zeidi claim and, for whatever reason, the British appear to have hesitated from quite early days to reject it outright, preferring to argue on the basis of the *de facto* realities of the situation rather than from claims possibly historically admissible. The 1914 Anglo-Turkish Boundary Convention was on this basis, that it was a matter of mutual administrative convenience and without prejudice to outstanding claims. This may have implied an admission by the British that claims existed, although they may have had in mind minor frontier adjustments rather than a claim to extensive areas of the Western Protectorate.

When the First World War ended, an attempt was made by the British to come to agreement, and a mission under Lieutenant Colonel Jacob, a Political Officer with long Arabian service, was despatched in 1919 to Sana, northern capital of the Yemen – the second capital being Taiz in the south. It came to an ignominious end, for it never reached Sana but was held captive for four months by the Quhra, a Shafai tribe which feared, with good reason, that the result of the mission would be to extend the authority of the Zeidi imams to their territory, then briefly free of both Turk and Imam.

In 1926 a further attempt was made, but this too failed, the Imam Yahya insisting on his claim to the southern districts, of which he then occupied substantial tracts in Dhala, Audhali and Rassassi country. Between 1926 and 1934 the British set out to honour, belatedly, their neglected obligations to the rulers of these invaded domains, and by methods political and military were by the latter year able to make a treaty with the Yemen for the better ordering of affairs on their borders. A pre-condition of the treaty was that occupied villages should be evacuated, prisoners and hostages

released, and trade routes reopened, and this was agreed by the Yemen.

But the treaty, achievement though it was and fruitful of ten years of relative peace on the frontier, did nothing to resolve the claims of the Yemen: it merely deferred them. Like the 1914 Convention, the agreement was made without prejudice to claims by either side, for the British pointed out that they were not asserting their own claims at all points up to the Anglo-Turkish line of 1914. Probably no other agreement could have been reached, and since the treaty was to run for forty years, until 1974, it might reasonably have been hoped that by that time circumstances might have changed to favour a more permanent settlement.

Regrettably, even the full term of the treaty has not been allowed to run and in effect it was broken in 1943–44 and has subsequently been shattered by repeated violations. Legally, however, it remains the binding document between the two countries, and like legal documents of all sorts, the document itself has given rise to new dissensions as differing interpretations of its clauses are advanced by the two parties. The crux of the matter is that the treaty deals fundamentally with the maintenance of the status quo as at 1934, and the agreement of the two parties to abstain from and prevent violation of the frontier or interference with the people living on the other side of it.

The Yemen has two sources of mischief in this apparently straightforward agreement: first, it avers that the word 'frontier' or 'frontiers', in Arabic, means not merely the line of demarcation between the two countries but some wider locality, and an area, not a line, the nearest English equivalent being perhaps 'marches'. Second, it avers that maintenance of the status quo requires that neither party shall make *any* changes on its side of the frontier. On the Yemen side this was easy enough, for activity or development of any sort, political or physical, was unlikely, but for the British such an interpretation would show them guilty at a hundred points as they have pressed forward, slowly perhaps, with developments of one sort and another. But the change in the status quo (by Yemeni definition) which really enraged the Yemen was the combination of the southern sultanates into the Federation.

The treaty was thus relatively successful for a decade, from 1934

until 1943, and frontier officers from each side co-operated to reduce border tension and prevent infringements of the treaty. By 1943, however (the Yemen remained neutral during the war), this relative harmony had frayed – how relative may be seen by reading Belhaven's adventures during these years in his *The Uneven Road** – and there was a sharp encounter at Haid al Ma near Perim, when the Yemenis set up a military post within the Protectorate and had to be compelled to withdraw.

In 1948 the Imam Yahya was murdered and, after a power struggle, was succeeded by his truculent son Ahmed who, as his father's governor in Taiz, had been notably hostile to the British. After his accession he was no less hostile for he believed that the conspirators who murdered his father had been aided and abetted, or permitted to operate, from Aden, which had already become the focus of liberal and anti-imamic Yemenis. His policy towards the south was therefore even less accommodating than his father's, for while Yahya had been willing to acknowledge the existence of a frontier, Ahmed simply ignored its existence. He intrigued, subverted, gave refuge to and encouraged every kind of discontent in the Protectorate. In the very first year of his reign, 1949, a storm arose when the Sherif of Beihan, a character no less colourful than the Imam Ahmed and whom we shall meet later, ruler of a state on the Yemen frontier, built a customs post at Nejd Marqad, a bleak rocky defile where not long before the sherif's son, Amir Saleh, and I had picnicked, overlooking the troubled Yemeni valley of Harib. The sherif's customs post, built with British consent, provoked the Yemen to protest that it was an infringement of the status quo: the details of the quarrel no longer matter. As retaliation the Yemenis too built a customs post, within Beihan territory, and had to be chased out of it at the cost of one wounded Yemeni.

Relations in this locality were made worse by the activities of a British oil exploration party operating at Shabwa, a desert site of salt mines and Himyartic ruins north-east of Beihan to which the Yemen laid claim. The British did not acknowledge this claim, and indeed treated all claims to rights at Shabwa with the greatest reserve, since the first sniff of petroleum had produced claims of

* John Murray, 1955

varying antiquity not only from the Yemen but from Beihan itself, from the freebooting Aulaqis of the desert fringe, and even from distant Quaiti, which protested that Shabwa was a westward extension of its Hadhrami provinces.

These several frictions led to a London conference in 1951 between the Yemen and Great Britain and a *modus vivendi* agreement was made which dealt with, or at least mentioned, the Nejd Marqad affair, the Shabwa area, and the status quo frontier line. 'Agreement' sounds encouraging but in practice made no change except to upset the sherif, for the British had agreed that his customs post should be evacuated! The hopes raised by the conference were quite illusory; there was no common ground regarding the Yemen's claims to the southern districts.

In 1953 Yemeni-inspired dissidence assumed more serious and sustained proportions: it was a policy of opportunism to which the inherent political frailties of the Protectorate gave full scope. Typical of several was the disputed leadership in the Upper Aulaqi Sheikhdom, the aggrieved section of the ruling house receiving aid, money and, eventually, asylum and a base for further operations in the Yemen. There were similar opportunities elsewhere. The Sultan of Upper Yafai was arrested on a technical charge of smuggling while traversing Yemeni territory *en route* to his country, and held captive for two months. Only a British threat to prohibit Yemeni aircraft the use (to them vital) of Aden airport brought about his release.

These troubles received further impetus when the first proposals for federation among the states of the Protectorate were mooted in 1954, since to the eyes of the Imam Ahmed the proposals were both a contravention of the status quo and a long-term threat to his claims to the area. By 1954 disorders and insecurity in the Protectorate were widespread: sections of the Audhali and Aulaqi tribes – Dammanis and Rabizis respectively – were in revolt, as well as a section of the Masabi in Beihan. By this year also the Egyptian revolution had established itself, and in Nasser's implacable anti-British policy, focus on affairs in the south was a useful weapon. The Cairo radio gave full support to the Yemeni and dissident cause, heaping abuse and threats on the British and the Protectorate rulers, who were branded as British puppets.

If the 1951 *modus vivendi* agreement had made no real difference to

affairs, neither did talks held at Taiz between the Governor of Aden and Yemeni officials in October 1954. The oral agreement obtained would not be confirmed in writing by the Yemen.

But the Imam did not have things all his own way. In 1955 an anti-Imam *coup d'état* was staged, unsuccessfully, and savage vengeance taken on the conspirators. There were public beheadings, of which smuggled photographs quickly reached the Aden Secretariat to horrify us all, among our files and memoranda, with the slave-swordsman flourishing the severed heads among the unkempt crowds. The Free Yemenis, the liberal exiles resident in Aden, were discouraged by the failure of the coup, which had raised their hopes of reform, appalled at the Imam's savage retribution (the victims included two of his own half-brothers) and not unaware of the propaganda value to their cause of the circulation, which became widespread, of these ghastly snapshots.

In 1956 a new piece moved on to the South Arabian chessboard when Saudi Arabia took a hand. The Imam had met King Saud and Egypt's Nasser at Jeddah, an unprecedented absence from his country, and persuaded them of his need for help. The Saudis gave him ten million dollars and also participated directly. To quote an official British account:*

> . . . a new and unexpected threat to security was presented by the arrival in February 1956 of arms and ammunition from Saudi Arabia. Two large trucks and a landrover appeared in the Upper Aulaqi Sultanate (not to be confused with the sheikhdom of the same name) from the Saudi province of Najran. They carried a consignment of Lee Enfield and Belgian rifles and a large quantity of ammunition for local dissidents; at the same time Sharora, an oasis within Saudi territory, was established as a centre for further distribution of rifles and ammunition, mainly to members of the Seiar tribe who owned allegiance to the Quaiti Sultan of Mukalla. Protectorate tribesmen were also invited to Nejran by the Saudi authorities, and it was evident that their intrusion into Protectorate affairs had the concurrence of the Yemen Government and the sympathy of Egypt.

The episode was uncharacteristic – as was the brief honeymoon

**Aden, the Protectorate and the Yemen* (H.M.S.O., 1960)

between three leaders so divergent in aims as the Jeddah trio of 1956 – since Anglo-Saudi relations have generally been amiable; but during the 1950s there was a notable irritant in the matter of the disputed ownership of the Buraimi oasis, between Muscat and Saudi, which may have influenced the Saudis to take a brief part in South Arabian affairs.

The most significant feature of 1956, however, was the arrival at the little Yemeni port of Hodeida of a shipload of arms – from Russia. These had been solicited by the Imam's roving ambassador, his son Badr, during a tour of Communist Europe, in which he had been encouraged, even sponsored, by Egypt's Nasser. The Imam needed arms for three reasons: to maintain his own position in the Yemen by gifts of arms and equipping an armed following; to arm the Regular Army for defence or frontier control; and to distribute to dissidents from the Protectorate. Moscow, never averse to stirring up trouble, supplied these needs, and it was the first significant move in a Russian programme which, in ten years, has established that power as the principal external influence in the Middle East.

This feature of the scene, now as then, would be the more alarming to others whose interests are affected were it not for certain Arab characteristics which operate against any foreign power obtaining a decisively influential position. The Imam may have accepted Russian arms but this did not, in his view, commit him to a pro-Russian policy, much less a pro-Communist one: the Russians, like other foreigners in the Yemen, even bearing gifts, have a difficult time.

The impetus given by the acquisition of these arms was felt immediately in the Protectorate, where disorder, dissidence and the desertion of Arab soldiers from local forces – the Aden Protectorate Levies – were continuous and widespread. Malcontents of every tribe were encouraged by gifts of arms and money: the Nakhai of Fadhli, the Azraqi of Dhala, the Alawi Sheikh, groups from Dathina – during these years all were encouraged. The rulers, with British advisers and support, fought these elements in a wearying, undramatic guerrilla of politics, violence, bribery and coercion.

By 1957 the Imam evidently felt that he had leaned far enough in one direction. As Russian and Chinese technicians multiplied, the traditional xenophobia and arrogance of the Zeidi reacted, and his son Badr once more took the road, this time to London, to discuss

outstanding differences. But as with the *modus vivendi* agreement of 1951 and the mission of 1954, the talks were without result. The Yemen even extended its claims by including a claim to the island of Kamaran. Disappointed and possibly offended by the lack of response and by his reception in London, Badr continued to Russia and eastern Europe where he obtained new agreements and promises of technical aid. His pro-Egyptian influence and the effect of Cairo's unending radio propaganda, with its message of a new and stimulating Arab revival, were factors in the Imam's decision to join the Yemen to Egypt and Syria in the short-lived United Arab States.

The paradox of this alliance between an autocratic mediaeval despotism and modernistic republicanism is more apparent than real: the Imam saw it in terms of aid for his own designs, in the south and in his country, while Nasser saw the extension of Egyptian influence, even with such curious allies as the Imam, as part of the revolutionary cycle centred on emergent Egypt. The link-up, short-lived though it was, thoroughly alarmed the Protectorate rulers since it implied the presence of Egypt on their threshold. It was one thing to fight the tyrannical imamic regime, which even the most rabidly anti-British nationalist would be obliged to admit was a government unacceptable by any standards, but quite another to combat the glossy image of revolutionary socialist pan-Arab Nasserism, freshly laurelled from the defeat of the British at Suez. (Egyptian military disasters against the Israelis were hushed up.) The rulers therefore, with British encouragement, began again to discuss federation, convinced that it was very much a case of either hanging together or hanging separately.

This development was received badly in the Yemen, and 1958 saw a continuation of troublemaking. Bombs in Aden itself made necessary the declaration of a State of Emergency. An invasion of Jebel Jihaff near Dhala besieged my friend, the imperturbable Fitzroy Somerset, in an isolated guard-post and it required the King's Own Shropshire Light Infantry to extricate him, a task accomplished with notable success and leading to a significant reverse for the dissidents. At the same time, less dramatic approaches were not neglected and on Yemeni initiative talks between officials were held at Diredawa in Ethiopia in July 1958, partly in the hope that the British could be persuaded to abandon the federation project. Like

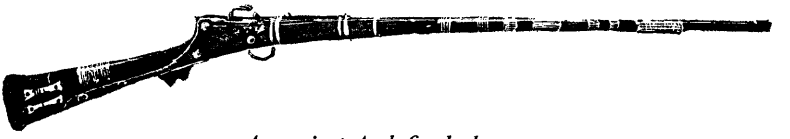
all the talks which preceded them, the Diredawa talks were without result.

By now the Imam Ahmed was ageing and ailing. His last years were plagued with sickness and plots against his life – he was severely wounded in an assassination attempt at Hodeida – and by doubts whether his son Badr, whom he had named his heir, had either the will or the desire to maintain Zeidi dominance and tradition. In his regency during an illness of the Imam, Badr had alarmed the old man, and the orthodox, with his modernistic, pro-Egyptian leanings, his attempted reforms and his weeding out of the old guard, and since primogeniture is not the rule in Islamic successions, the Imam considered naming his own brother Hassan to succeed him in preference to his son. But Hassan was slightly tainted with foreign ways – he had been long abroad as an emissary – and finally Badr was proclaimed next in succession. There is an audible note of apprehension in the terms in which the father made the announcement to the nation that his son was to become their ruler, as though the old man foresaw the troubles to come.

Ahmed's last years were disturbed too by the increasing web of foreign entanglements – notably Egyptian – and one of his last significant actions was to broadcast in December 1961 what in effect was an attack on Nasser's brand of revolutionary socialism. This alien creed, and Nasser's parvenu career, made no genuine appeal to the old autocrat: he ruled by Divine Right, and had no time for upstart soldiers. The Jeddah-begun honeymoon was over. Nasser responded by bringing to an end the short and unhappy existence of the United Arab States and turning against the Imam the batteries of Saut al Arab, the 'Voice of the Arabs', the Cairo broadcasting service.

Thus when the old man came to his long-awaited end on 18th September 1962 – and one cannot help but feel a sneaking regard for so full-blooded an old tyrant, the vitality, the savage confidence on his lonely eminence, unabashed to the end by new world forces shaking his remote kingdom – there was a near-unanimous sigh of relief. The liberals-in-exile hoped for better things; the Egyptians had their own reasons for rejoicing; the Protectorate rulers felt that no matter what line his successor took in relation to their small states, it could hardly be worse, or more dangerous, than Ahmed's

rule had been. Perhaps the British too hoped for better times, although it was the smart thing at Aden cocktail parties to shake the head knowingly and aver that Ahmed's tyranny was Britain's most potent ally and a safeguard for Britain's position: a new and reformist regime might embarrass the British more than the old. However, all speculation came to an end within a week. Badr had scarcely interred the morphine-soaked bones of his ferocious father when, on the night of 26th September, revolution broke out in Sana. The long night was over. Or was it?



An ancient Arab fire-lock gun

CHAPTER X

SHUQRA TO YESHBUM

In England, forty miles will take you through a variety of country, through stretches so distinct and individual one from another that to a journey of such a distance there is a proper relationship of time and space. Long before your forty miles click up on the milometer you have traversed a variety of scene and character, towns and villages, hills and valleys, streams and bridges and woods. It is not so in Arabia.

Only forty miles lie between the cotton lands of Abyan and the foot of the Arqub Pass at Shuqra, but in all that stretch there is no single variation between mile and mile, and the sole indication of the passage of distance is the outline of the mountains which lie, like a threat of old fires, parallel with the coast. Even the mountains are no certain guide: their saw-teeth bite remorselessly into the aching blue sky and maintain throughout their length a savage anonymity.

But there is now at least one reference point along the Shuqra track, at Assalah, a deserted village on a low hillock of its own ruined past, where, borne on rough columns above a well-head, there is an

inscription in stone, in Arabic. It is in memory of Colonel Lake, a former Political Officer and romantic in the long line of Englishmen who have, each after his fashion, loved the Arabs. Lake left a legacy to pay for the digging of a well to benefit the Beduin, an agreeable and simple project but, like everything else in Arabia, more easily conceived than carried out. Some years after Lake's death, when I had taken over the Fadhli district, I inherited a thin file labelled 'Lake's Well' from which I gathered that the legacy had been spent in digging a well but that the money ran out before water had been found. This was embarrassing since there was an unanswered letter from a relative of Colonel Lake enquiring about progress and asking if photographs of the well might be supplied. With characteristic generosity the Fadhli Naib, Hussein bin Abdullah, agreed to pay for my suggestion that the spirit of the legacy might be met by tidying up an existing well, erecting a concrete well-head with pulleys, and adding an inscription.

This we did at Assalah. I had difficulty finding a stone-mason capable of cutting an inscription, but finally it was done, although crudely. Some giggling Hanashi girls were photographed at the well-head hauling at goatskins of water, and the pictures despatched to England. In Fadhli records the well is named officially 'Bir Lake', that is, Lake's Well, but whether the Beduins use that name is doubtful. Englishmen spend their lives – or used to do – dedicated to some far-off people whose impact upon them, Zulus or Pathans, Hausas or Arabs, colours their whole lives. They become a brief legend, so that their former districts seem flavourless without them; or so it seems to their successors, watching the homebound commissioner vanish down the track. But do the local people remember them? While clubs and secretariats and mail-boats will remember them in bar-room stories – for a year or two anyway – do the sheikhs and village heads, the chiefs and greybeards, the peasants and tribesmen, also remember? At all events, Colonel Lake has his memorial in the well beside the Shuqra track, and I mine in the building of it.

If you are so fortunate that your journey coincides with a low tide and venture the beach route, you will see, where the coast makes a shallow curve, the fishing village of Shuqra gleam white across dark blue water. Picturesque it appears, white against blue, cubed and

shadowed, backed by purple mountains, but it proves to be disappointingly small and dirty. The dwellings are of fawn mud, a few whitewashed and rising to a third or fourth storey, with a scrofulous fringe of brushwood shanties. There are perhaps a thousand people, mostly fishermen and their families. On the steeply shelving beach are drawn up the graceful fishing vessels, *sambuks*, fifteen to twenty feet long, narrow-beamed and slender-prowed. Offshore, in the haven provided on this harbourless coast by a small reef, there may be a dhow, carrying kerosene from Aden or dates from Mukalla.

The beach is very dirty, since the fishermen gut their fish where they land them, right against the village. Since much of the catch is shark and other large fish, the result of their gralloching is conspicuous to eye and nose. I used regularly to blitz the fishermen and town councillors on the subject during visits of inspection, and on one notable occasion insisted that the entire town council tramp about the village with me, over every heap of offal and manure, through every stinking alleyway (I was young and keen in those days) to press home the validity of my criticisms. Shuqra hadn't enjoyed itself so much in years as in the spectacle of our party of dignitaries picking up its fastidious skirts through the middens and byres, while my peroration, in execrable Arabic, delivered from the summit of a high dunghill, was heard not only by the puffing and embarrassed councillors but by a crowd of dirty children, the soldiers from the guard-post and a frieze of female heads crowding the surrounding roof-tops.

At Shuqra was a unique rest house, an old Arab house of three storeys on the foreshore. The warmth of one's welcome depended on the rest-house keeper, Abdullah Hoqfa, a likeable old man, talkative, willing and very poor. He would produce excellent meals of fish, curried in the Arab style, with great rounds of hot pancake-bread, and would stand over you as you ate, talking endlessly. He would complain that repairs had not been carried out, that his wages were inadequate, that his children were sick. Unusually, he was a fearfully loyal and pro-British old man, papering odd corners with magazine portraits of the Queen and droning on for hours about the great figures of the past – Lake and Seager, Davey and Figgis. I would like to think that I may have joined Hoqfa's roll of honour, for with the passage of time even the least of us might hope for our small place in

the memory of a district. But I doubt it: on any scene, the giants lived always a year or two before one's own arrival.

From Shuqra there are two roads, one continuing along the coast in increasing loneliness to the Lower Aulaqi town of Ahwar, the second winding upwards into the grape-blue distances of the Arqub Pass. I have traversed the latter on innumerable occasions yet have not ceased to wonder at the utter desolation of that place. A few miles from Shuqra the track begins to climb and you find yourself among black lava boulders the size of cannon-balls: the rock is not coal-black but a sullen clinker-like blue-black, gnarled and sharply excrescent, disagreeably rough to the touch. Among these boulders the track winds dusty white, for twenty miles rising steadily, the sea falling behind and Shuqra *diminuendo* against the blue. In the higher reaches great red peaks surround it, a purplish hot red with nothing of gentleness in it – the Arabic name for them is Al Hamra, the Red – dripping in folds and swathes as though the molten rock were not yet cooled. There are prospects, west and east, of stark valleys running between ridges and climbing inland towards the Yafai highlands. In all this fearsome route there is no vegetation, except, incredibly, in occasional gullies where stunted flat-topped acacias have forced a living from the infertile dust.

The last of my many traverses of the pass was with Ahmed Bashraheel, who many years before had been my assistant in Abyan. We were fortunate, at a time when we were both senior enough to be mostly desk-bound, to get away for a few days' duty-touring, and travelled from Aden, through Abyan and Shuqra, over the Arqub to Dathina and Audhali, and finally, by Mahfidh and Yeshbum, to remote Beihan, isolated on the desert edge against the Yemen. That journey is described in this chapter and the next.

We left Shuqra after breakfast, the landrover low on its springs with baggage and passengers, the driver Mohammed Yafai, my orderly the tall Kazimi, Ahmed Mansur, and, as always in South Arabia, a couple of stray characters who appeared at the last minute for a lift to Lodar. Although desolate the track was full of incident, for it is, after all, a main highway. There was a *kafila* (caravan) of Hanashi, Beduin of eastern Fadhli, dark with indigo, kilted and daggered, their camels picking their way gingerly with soft pads, over the sharp lava, *en route* to Abyan and work in the cotton fields. There

was a lorry broken down, tilted over the edge of the track, the passengers huddled patiently in its insignificant shade. We proffered assistance but the lame duck said he would be able to get going in an hour or two, but would we take with us a woman who was unwell. So she was added, black-shrouded, to the cook, a soldier, the two casuals, the bedding-rolls and the beer-boxes in the crowded back of the landrover.

Here on the Arqub you will see baboons, and that improbable cousin of the elephant the hyrax, like a large guinea-pig, darting among the rocks. The animal life of South Arabia is unexciting. In the mountains are a few leopards – I saw one, recently killed, in Khaura, grotesquely stuffed, with straw protruding from its empty eyes and jaws, pale in colour and eight feet from nose to tail; but they are uncommon. On the desert fringes are a very few Arabian oryx, on the point of extinction, and ibex are fairly common in the mountains of Wahidi and around the Hadhramaut: the walls of houses are decorated with their horns. There are hyenas, jackals and foxes, but not in great numbers, and gazelle in the plains of the coast and the desert fringes. I have found porcupine quills in the beds of the Abyan wadis and there is, I believe, a type of wolf as well as wild cats, lynx and ratels. Of reptiles there are cobras in the lusher valleys around Dhala, but in fourteen years I saw but one snake, and that a small one, on the beach near Mukalla. There are chameleons and scorpions and a repulsive beast called a camel-spider (solifugid) with fierce double jaws, palely yellow and grey, as large as a man's palm, but quite harmless. Altogether it is an unspectacular array.

Here on the watershed at the head of the pass we were still in Fadhli, in the eastern tribal sector of that state, where Nakhai and Markashi and Hanashi occupy the infertile hills. To the Fadhli ruler they pay grudging allegiance, and in return are assured of a protector in their unending feuds among themselves and with their neighbours. Their chieftains would visit Shuqra or Zingibar to pay seasonal greetings, to bring a little tribute, maybe to leave a hostage as guarantee of good behaviour. In return they would be feasted by the sultan and given presents of cloth and arms. A curious system, of great antiquity, and up to a certain level of political development it works well enough.

Beyond Am Surra we entered the Audhali Sultanate – it rhymes

with proud-a-lee – and could see the houses of Zara and Lodar, dark with citrus gardens, clustered about the foot of a steep tor, itself dwarfed by the escarpment behind it, sweeping a sheer thousand feet. Zara is charming. There are one or two large trees, tamarisks of unusual size and beautiful beidans with silver-grey trunks and waxy leaves of russet and crimson. There are the egg-shaped domes of the tombs of holy men, mud-plastered and crudely pargeted, twenty feet high, supported on freestone walls with crow-step pinnacles at each corner. Behind walls are little fruit gardens, with lemons and oranges and even grapefruit, recently introduced, and the little ways and lanes are lively with the patter of neat donkey-hooves, the little grey beasts invisible under huge loads of lucerne or millet, panniers of Indian corn or bales of cotton. Most striking is the tor on which are set, like upended matchboxes, four tall stone buildings, palaces if you like, of the Audhali ruling family. None has a surrounding wall but each springs from the sudden rock and rises, very slightly inward-leaning, to six or seven storeys, marked by a frieze of small windows and terminating in a pinnacled flat roof, picked out in whitewash. Their angularity, design and situation make them singularly picturesque.

Zara was the home of the Audhali ruler, Sultan Saleh bin Hussein, C.M.G., a Minister of the Federal Government and a founder of the Federation. We nicknamed him the 'Wykehamist', from the gravity of his demeanour, the sobriety of his habits and the instinct perfection of his manners. When first I knew him – Audhali was briefly in my charge – he was young and slim. With the years he has achieved a solid build, enhancing the distinction of his slightly Malay-type features: the eyes are heavy-lidded, outward slanting, the skin smooth, pale coffee-coloured, the forehead broad and calm, the chin marked with a small beard. He was one of the most able of the Ministers and rulers, and his loyalty to a cause – the British-made Federation – that must often have seemed lost was remarkable.

From three thousand feet Zara looked very small, and at that height – seven thousand feet above sea level – there is in the air a distinct chill. Behind the wheels of our overheated landrover the topmost zigzags of the Thirra Pass lurched out of sight across the face of the escarpment. The making of the Thirra road, which is not a pass in the classic model of the Arqub but rather a goat-track for a not-too-elderly goat, was a major achievement for the Public Works

Department. It leads to Mukeiras, an upland village and airstrip.

At Mukeiras stands the sole European-style hotel in the South Arabian interior, overlooking a fruit orchard and a hollow of small fields. It opened in 1961, with a flourish of publicity and a special airline flight from Aden of distinguished guests – refinery tycoons, bank managers, newspaper editors and the like. I went along too, to represent my master, the British Agent, and to do the Protectorate honours to all these city slickers. All went well to begin with: we were met at the airfield by Naib Jaabil, prime mover in the project and brother to Sultan Saleh, and proceeded to a first-class English breakfast. A sightseeing run to the top of the Thirra Pass was followed by an equally well-served lunch. I enjoyed the trip, although I had to work hard translating, as Jaabil was ignorant of English while the guests were equally ignorant of Arabic. Since they were all eager to tell Jaabil to lay out tennis courts, build a golf-course or install fruit-machines, words not often required in my work, the effort strained my vocabulary to its limit. After lunch we sat to wait for the afternoon plane which was to take everyone back to their VIP desks in Aden. Alas, it came on to rain and when it had continued for ten minutes, the knowledgeable among us, keeping our apprehensions to ourselves, wondered how the airstrip would stand up to it.

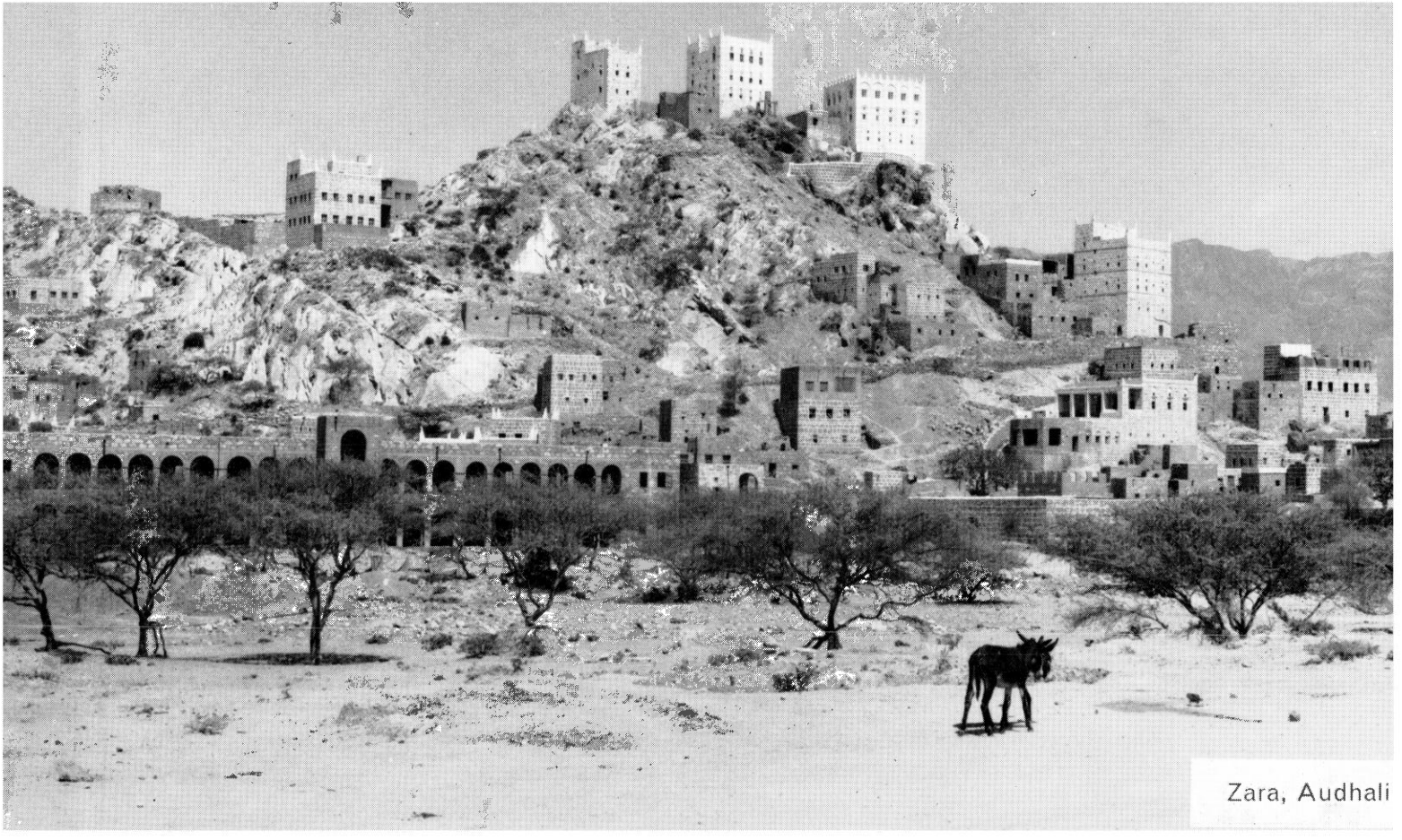
Of course, it didn't stand up to it at all, and within ten minutes was flooded, with sheets and pools of water lying about the never very smooth surface of the runway. Then the rain stopped, and the afternoon Dakota came droning up over the lip of the escarpment, took one look at the waterlogged airstrip and beetled off back again to Aden. There'd be no landing that day! The consternation among the distinguished guests was *formidable*! Crises loomed in the banking world, in oil refineries, in editorial offices. Was there a radio link with Aden? Could they communicate with their offices, their wives, their secretaries? I did my best for them, passing messages painfully by morse through Arab soldier-signallers. The long grey afternoon passed into evening. Tea was long past, and the VIPs began to look around for a drink. In vain: the hotel was Muslim and teetotal.

Once again the political service rose to the occasion. I despatched the young political officer resident in those parts to lay hands, by hook or by crook, on some hooch, either from his own supplies or

from the Levies Mess, and in the end we were able to keep everyone happy. Not only did we provide a wire-service and whisky but I was able to be even more One Up by producing from behind my breast-pocket handkerchief a toothbrush and from another pocket a slim book of verse, thereby enjoying facilities not available to, and much envied by, my fellow maroonees. My friend Eric Williamson, a distinguished banker in the party, has not ceased to chaff me about this. How, he says, could you have known that we'd be overnighted? Who would have anticipated, when setting out for a half-day jaunt, the need for a toothbrush and a book? I smile inscrutably: not often am I One Up, and the sensation is agreeable.

Mukeiras has been for forty years one of the principal battlefields of the running war with the Yemen; no tribe has suffered as the Audhali from that ancient tyranny. During my years, the frontier war in this locality was fought by the irrepressible Naib Jaabil bin Hussein. He is short in stature, not more than five feet one or two, compact and wiry, clean-shaven and keen featured, with dark mischievous eyes. His personal bravery was a legend, his charm, vitality and humour quite overwhelming. Jaabil heard the echo of every shot fired along that long and troubled frontier. He had led raids and forays into the Yemen, giving them a taste of their own medicine, and it was with stunned unbelief that in 1964 we learned of his defection to the Yemen-Egyptian, anti-Federation cause.

After visiting the frontier posts beyond Mukeiras we returned to Lodar, Bashraheel and I, down the hair-raising Thirra Pass, heading eastwards through a strange landscape, between the sheer wall of the three-thousand-foot *kaur* and the receding southern mountains. Here the plain is dominated by towering sugar-loaf peaks of naked rock, grey-white in the morning sun, streaked with weathering and ochreous stains. There is more greenery than in the bare Nakhai lands, a scattering of acacias and more cultivation, farms and hamlets and fields hedged with cactus. There were signs of the relative peace which has prevailed since the British presence became effective. The thumping of pumping engines at well-heads had replaced, in many places, the ragged black figures of women endlessly hauling goat-skin water-bags. At night the tall houses of rich men gleamed with electricity from small generators. Yet violence remained: we passed the spot where, not two years before, the son of my old friend Sheikh



Zara, Audhali

An Aulaqi poet from Nisa

Ali Hadi was ambushed and killed as he drove from his fields on a tractor. The murderers, dissident tribesmen of his own clan, escaped to the immunity of nearby Beihda and the protection of the Imam.

We were in the Republic of Dathina, unique in this land of autocratic rulers, a British creation to resolve the anarchy of an area where three tribes meet – Fadhli, Audhali and Aulaqi (rhymes with cowla-key), each having claims to, and having exercised intermittent authority over, all or part of it. So the British set up one of their favourite compromise solutions by creating the Republic of Dathina, consisting of the three vigorous, intelligent and turbulent clans of Hassani, Meisari and Am Saidi. I attended many meetings of its noisy State Council, in poky mud towers, listening for hours to the shouted arguments, shirted landowners on one side, indigo-stained tribesmen on the other. But new state buildings have now replaced the smoky, loopholed towers of my first years. In the market place of Mudia shirts are almost *de rigueur* where before they were the sign of a man of substance. Dathina is a classic case of

'A courthouse stands where the regiment go'ed
And the river's clean where the red blood flowed.'

As we approached Mudia, the principal town, flat-roofed tall houses white and brown among an agreeable clustering of trees, it appeared to be *en fête*: dark-turbanned ranks of soldiers drawn up across the village square, white-shirted lines of schoolchildren marshalled into groups, rooftops a-bobbing with the black figures of women, and at the entry point where the track, emerging from the fields and cactus hedges, humped itself up to the fort, a group of notables. 'I think', said Bashraheel 'there is a guard of honour for you.' Very tricky: I was unprepared, dressed in my usual travelling outfit of shirt and wide-blue shorts, bare legs and plimsolls, topped with a straw hat of antique shape. (It bore originally, on a blue band, the legend 'H.M.S. *Pinafore*'. I had reversed the riband to conceal its theatrical origins but otherwise made no concessions to convention ; it was a hat of great character.)

'Turn in here.' I said to the driver, and we nosed off the dusty track into a clump of tamarisk. By this time we were within sight of the reception committee, and our disappearance into the bushes must have raised in their hearts a wild surmise. They clustered and chattered together, pointing in our direction and peering towards our

alfresco retiring room. Here, deep in the undergrowth, I plunged into my luggage, retrieved a pair of long trousers and a necktie but sought unavailingly for shoes: they had been left behind at Mukeiras. There were acid exchanges between my servant and me as to which of us was responsible, while I struggled into the trousers, dusted myself down, adjusted the Pinafore hat to its most sober elevation and set off for the waiting town.

The notables pressed about the car to welcome us, the guard of honour presented arms, I passed with, I hope, dignity down the ranks, raised Pinafore in salute to the Federal flag and waved to the cheering schoolchildren. The whole thing went off with an aplomb worthy of Windsor and I hope no one felt badly about the plimsolls. I had at least shown willing to meet the spirit of the occasion.

After a morning of inspections and lunch I was presented by Sheikh Ali Hadi with a memorable souvenir of my visit, an antique matchlock rifle, nearly six feet long, bound with silver, the butt decorated with patterns of ivory or bone. Its bore is half an inch, and it was fired by pressing a crude trigger, not more than a lever really, which brought down upon a pan of powder the glowing end of a slow-match, gripped in the sprung cleft of a swan-neck. This in turn ignited, through a small hole in the chamber, the charge within, and launched up the long iron barrel a ball the size of an acorn. It must have made a fearful bang and an even more fearful hole in the target.

On the next day, in the rosy light of dawn, Bashraheel and I resumed our journey eastwards, accompanied from here onwards by an escorting landrover of soldiers since the way lay through country notably unsettled. For a few miles the track lay among the ordered and attractive Dathina villages. By some happy chance, for defensive or other purposes, they are set picturesquely in their landscape, on knolls or the steep banks of wadis, or on the skirts of distant grey-blue hills. The knowledge that within their crowded walls they are smelly, unpaved and unswept did not detract from my pleasure in this scene.

But before long the villages were left behind, and we passed through a desolate region of black lava boulders. The southern mountains crowd up on the right, while the great *kaur*, on the other side, becomes more broken and moves closer to the lonely track. The Dathina plateau is left behind, and the way lurches eastwards through

fearful rocks and watercourses, thickets of thirsty tamarisk and a tangle of endless scrambling hills. In such country, driving a landrover is a full-time occupation; by the end of the day my shoulders and wrists were aching, the palms of my hands red from sweat and sore from hanging on to the jolting, jarring wheel. This is bad country. There is no dwelling place between the last Hassani villages and the Mahfidh plain, except for tiny Lahmar fort, pinnacled on a tor beside the track with its picket of ten men, radio and machine gun. There is no peace here: no villages, no cultivation, no water; six weeks before, an Arab Political Officer, the dignified bin Ashal, had been severely wounded in an ambush. Only the Beduin move, dwarfed by the sky and rocks, their harsh and empty days set cruelly in this cruel landscape.

Among the lava we met a party of them, Illahi of the Aulaqi or, as the Illahi would have it, the Illahi of the Illahi, for they own no sultan. This party had been into Mudia to surrender hostages to the Dathina authorities against their good behaviour: typical Beduin of the region, stained with indigo, from twisted skimpy headcloth to horny feet, to a sooty blue-black. They were naked to the waist where, supported by a bullet-filled belt, was wound a short, knee-length kilt of indigo-stained cloth. Each man had a dagger – not the gold and silver encrusted *jambiyyahs* of sultans but simple affairs of bone and horn in plain leather sheaths – and was armed with a rifle, from modern British Lee Enfields back through strange French carbines, Martini Henrys, Lee Metfords, and heaven knows what strange ironmongery. Small leather amulets or lockets, containing Koranic texts, were bound by leather laces to the upper arm or around the throat. In greasy elf-locks their hair hung to shoulder length. They smelt powerfully of indigo and spoke with the harsh loud voices of men unaccustomed to roofs and walls.

Past noon we topped a rise among the endless tangle of bare rock hills and saw before us the scrub-covered plain of Mahfidh, backed by an impressive flat-topped mountain, the Jebel Ramd, first outlier of that eastern scenery which takes over from the greyer, harsher west. The bright promise of the morning had departed and the day was overcast, dark clouds pressing down on the bleak plain. Spots of thunder-rain smeared the dust-grimed windscreen, we were sticky, tired and uncomfortable. At Mahfidh we stopped for tea at the fort

and the soldiers pressed us to stay for a meal, but I was not hungry and wanted to press on to reach the Wadi Yeshbum before dark.

It might have been a more sensible staging of the journey to have spent the night at Mahfidh but I have never been fond of the place. North of it the untamed Mansuri carried on their endless feuds; south and east the Ba Kazim – my orderly was a Kazimi – chafed and fretted under the rule of the Ahwar sultans. The town itself, crowded and stinking on a plinth of its own rubbish, seethed with faction. Violence was all about and during earlier visits there was scarcely a night when we did not hear firing at or near the fort. But my greatest objection to Mahfidh was the number of rats which made the fort their home. On a previous occasion, going out into the darkness on to the ramparts where my washing gear had been laid out on the wall (life in the fort at Mahfidh was devoid of mod. cons.), I put my hand out for the soap and clutched instead one of these loathsome creatures as it sat making a meal of my palmolive!

The thundery rain which heralded our arrival at this usually dusty outpost caused a welcoming sheikh to exclaim that my visit brought a blessing. I did not at first understand him, for the words he used were idiomatic, an unfamiliar proverb, until Bashraheel explained that the coincidence of my arrival with the rainstorm was an omen of an especially favoured future for myself. I had, as it were, brought the rain.

Welcome though the rain might be to the parched farmers of Mahfidh, it proved that day a hindrance to our journey; although the shower had been short, we met, in a wadi beyond Mahfidh, the resultant flood. At first it was nothing to bother about, an inch or two deep over the bone-dry gravel, but the swiftness of its build-up was astonishing and within minutes it was over our wheel hubs. Even so brief a flash-flood was amazing in the power it developed, tumbling boulders and tearing at the roots of the tamarisks. Fortunately we were able to reach higher ground before we were in serious trouble.

At Al Khabr we swung north. Here the topographical distinction could be seen between west and east. Westwards lay tangled pointed hills and whale-back ridges, continuing unbroken to the Red Sea coast of Yemen, a homogeneous region. But eastwards thrust up great mesas, flat-topped mountains like those which fringe the Wadi Hadhramaut. Even the colour and texture of these rocks differ from

those of the western area. They are like those of the American deserts and canyons, wind-carved and eroded into strange shapes, pinnacles and arches and banded skirts of scree. There is a size and a grandeur about them lacking in the western hills, strikingly displayed in all their desolate beauty at a pass, or saddle, called Masharah. Ahead lay what appeared to be an immense peak but is, in fact, the end-on view of a vast flat-topped ridge, Jebel Sugaimah, seven or eight miles long and five thousand feet high; in the westering sun it glowed ochre and madder and crimson, with shadows of violet and grey and blue. To right and left of this massif were tilted buttes and mesas, pinnacles and flaring buttresses. This surely was the dream-landscape I saw in Sidney Keyes' 'Wilderness':

'The red rock wilderness
Shall be my dwelling place.

Where the wind saws at the bluffs
And the pebble falls like thunder
I shall watch the clawed sun
Tear the rocks asunder.

The rock says "Endure"
The wind says "Pursue"
The sun says "I will suck your bones
And afterwards bury you." '

At Said next morning, my financial assistant, Fadhl Hassan, himself an Aulaqi of Said, took me for a delightful early morning walk down the valley, over the white stones of the Wadi Yeshbum, between narrow terraces of brilliantly green young corn, millet and maize, and between fine trees – dates and tamarisks and 'ilb and beidan. There were patches of vegetables, and the State Treasurer showed me over his thriving garden, irrigated by an electrically driven pump at the head of his deep stone-lined well. He had chillies, like red corals among the green, and fresh limes, onions and cabbages, tomatoes, grapefruit and beans. Among the beds the Treasurer's aged father pottered, just as it might have been in a Devonshire cottage garden, while the pumping engine thumped reassuringly in the background, bright water gurgling through the channels and yellow

weaver-birds flashing among the trees. The whole valley gave an impression of modest plenty, an oasis among the wilderness of rock surrounding it. People bustled about cheerfully and children ran shouting among flocks of goats. Yet this valley has been the scene of as much dark violence as any in the south; Belhaven called it 'Murder Valley'.

That evening we dined with the Amir Farid bin Mohsin, brother to the ruler; a soldier led us from the Political Officer's house, hurricane lantern in hand, over stony pathways past the cemetery of white-washed glimmering tombs, the air cool and notably dry, pungent with the smell of goats and cattle. At the entrance to his large tower-like house the amir met us, a picturesque figure in his calf-length kilt, white open-necked shirt with European jacket, and jaunty turban, lit dramatically by the strong glare of pressure lamps, which picked out the gold of his dagger hilt and the sheen of the silken turban.

The amir's house was in the traditional style but notably modern and very comfortable: staircase and landings were cemented, wide and well lit, the reception room large, with the usual low-set recessed windows, the floor laid with polished linoleum and a selvedge of bright cushions around the walls. An unusual feature which greatly attracted me was the ceiling support, not the usual pillar of mud masonry but decorated pillars of carved wood surmounted by a heavy wooden capital. The carving of these is in the style of 'chip-carving', that is, simple patterns of diamonds, stars and squares – nothing approaching the artistry of Kashmir or China but, in a land with so few arts and crafts, notable and agreeable. They were made, the amir told me, in the valley; the wooden capitals were known, oddly, as 'sheep'.

The contrast between the amir's fine house and the traditional dwellings of the poorer people was marked. In the latter one found oneself groping upwards from the entrance in pitch darkness, for the stairway is built into the core of the house and is windowless, without handrail or banister, the steps uneven in height and width, the treads badly worn. Indeed, in old houses the so-called staircases were barely more than steep ramps, the steps being worn quite away. They climb and turn through poky landings, past dark openings whence come identifying smells: of greasy mutton – the kitchen; of heavy perfume –

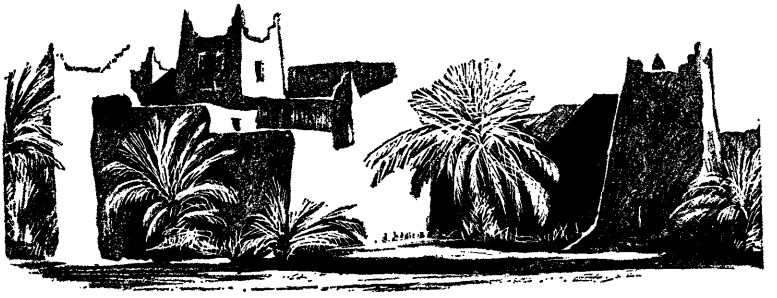
the *harim*; and that old old smell, so evocative, so redolent of South Arabian days, from the lurking longdrop loo. One goes, like the youth 'mid snow and ice, onwards and upwards in this odoriferous gloom, stumbling and groping for what seems a very long time, through four or five storeys, before emerging thankfully into the reception room.

The Aulaqi visit concluded with a memorable meal. I have already described the local cuisine but must ask the reader's indulgence to mention the notable table spread for me by Fadhl Hassan. He had a modest but comfortable house just across the valley from Said and we sat, a welcome variation, not in an upper room but in a small open courtyard on the roof, illumined threefold by pressure lamps, the white moonlight and a cheerful red flickering gleam from the open door of the kitchen. The meal was superb. There was boiled rice and fried rice, there was rice coloured yellow with turmeric and rice garnished with pistachios and raisins. There was rice in heaps, bearing on its steaming shoulders large joints of mutton, boiled and roasted. Bright enamelled bowls steamed with spiced and curried meats and vegetables, succulent chops, ladies' fingers, peas and potatoes, all swimming in red spicy gravy. There was that omnipresent South Arabian delicacy, Italian tomato purée, and a deliciously biting sauce compound of chillies and fresh limes. There were platters of curious twisted items looking like the old English country fare of natlings and chitlings, pale, flaccid and unattractive in appearance but succulent and tender. There were flaps of hot, soft unleavened bread and, mixed colourfully among all the rest, bowl after bowl of tinned fruit, yellow peaches, red cherries, purple plums.

I complimented Fadhl on the excellence of the dinner. Private meals such as this, for a small gathering, are superior always to the large public spreads where the food is usually cold. Alas, these latter are more common since the Arab is, like others, obliged to keep Up With the Joneses, and the larger the party, the greater the social prestige – and the colder the food! Fadhl modestly disclaimed the compliment and attributed it to the excellence of his wife's cooking – an unusual remark, but Fadhl was representative of the educated young men coming up in the civil service and could pass such a comment; an older or uneducated man would not have made reference to his wife. She was an Aden girl, he said, and Aden women

were always better cooks, with their access to spices and salads and a greater variety of food, than the tribal maidens.

Through the lime trees of Fadhl's little orchard, we returned across the moonlit bed of the wadi, a sentry challenging us sharply to show his alertness, and heard a last lonely dog howling against the high moon in some remote Atiqi hamlet.



Beihan houses

CHAPTER XI

BEIHAN

From Said we jolted up out of the Wadi Yeshbum and through a wide vale to Museina; southward the blue ranges rose one behind the other, the heartland of the Aulaqi. Ataq was our destination, a village, an airstrip and a battalion of the Federal Regular Army. Here, over open desert, the going was easier, of gravelly earth, firm and gently undulating, with occasional low acacia bushes, the sand heaped about their roots on the windward side. By now it was late afternoon and the sun was sinking, a red-copper ball against turquoise and apple-green, throwing long shadows from every pebble on the wind-scoured surface of the desert. Cresting a slow ridge, we gained our first sight of a mountain prospect on a scale even more grand than at Nejd al Masharah: here the mountains are flat-topped, falling back eastwards, headland beyond headland, into an infinity of distance. No stage designer could conceive so romantic and dramatic a background, the receding thousand-feet cliffs coasting a desert sea; where the escarpment curved sharply southward it presented a face to the declining sun and glowed carmine and crimson, ochre and violet.

The army camp was of large tents within a palisade of stone and sandbags and picketed barbed wire, reminiscent, with its parked ranks of armoured cars and desert-painted lorries and whitewashed guard-room, of India's North West Frontier. The Arab soldiers were smart in light-coloured khaki drill, open-necked shirts and shorts, coloured tassels on the garters of their hose, polished black boots under tight puttees, topped off with neatly folded Punjabi-style khaki turbans, fringed with colour. The officers were mostly British, but a plan of replacing them with Arabs was under way and within a few years the force would be officered entirely by Arabs, although foreign officers or experts for the technical arms would presumably continue to be required. In these 1960s it is permissible to wonder for how long that outside assistance will continue to be British. The value of these South Arabian troops has yet to be proved in major operations, while in tribal fighting local loyalties make this army one to be employed with caution. A large proportion of the force is drawn from the Aulaqi, natural mercenaries who have no great taste for farming and peaceful pursuits and to whom well paid, well fed soldiering, with small prospect of hardship or danger, offers great attraction.

The following morning I had business with the colonel commanding the battalion, and we were unable to start on the last lap of our journey to Beihan until nearly noon. Although it was not the height of summer, so late a departure was unfortunate: the entire journey of some 120 miles lay across open desert; but we had no choice, and into a haze of shimmering mirage we set out.

We had been advised that the journey would take half a day, and since we covered the first twenty-five miles in as many minutes we wondered why so forbidding a time-table had been forecast. The going was blissfully easy, as on the previous evening, over open gravelly desert across which we roared in best Eighth Army style. At first the tracks were fairly clear, but later became vague, with tyre marks leading in all directions, and I was glad that we had with us a guide from the Bel Harith tribe.

The Bel Harith are interesting, differing significantly from the other tribes of the Western Protectorate, who share common characteristics and physical features. The Bel Harith are taller, big featured men, wearing long dirty-white robes in the manner of the north, and winding their turbans in a distinctive fashion. In Beihan they have

become semi-settled, having small mud-and-brush hamlets at the northern fringes of the Wadi Beihan where the last of the flood waters run out into the desert. Here they raise sparse and uncertain crops, but still wander, seasonally, off into the desert where crops will not grow to pasture their large herds of camels, following barely perceptible grazing through barely discernible depressions on the face of the desert.

Our own little Bel Harith man was not particularly impressive, in his wisp of headcloth, straggly beard and grubby smock, gathered at the waist with a greasy money-belt and leather-sheathed dagger, but clearly he knew his way about in this featureless landscape, peering now and again at the haze of the distant mountains or at the surface of the ground, directing me from the back of the landrover by waving over my shoulder for more helm, port or starboard.

It was like entering a sea, this driving into the desert: the mountains fell behind us like a receding coastline in promontory after promontory, flat-topped to eastwards, saw-toothed against the noon sun over Aulaqi, while we sped on into a heat-shimmered nothingness. The emptiness closed around us, creating in its very width and solitude an intimacy, a protective shell, within the hot and dusty interior of the landrover – Bashraheel, his handsome light bronze skin growing paler beneath a coating of dust, Ahmed Mansur, the gentle Kazimi, cuddling his rifle and my twelve-bore shotgun, the little Bel Harith guide darting glances through the windows, eyelashes whitening with dust, Haddar, the gay Hassani, who had merely come along for the ride from his native Dathina, being on leave and there being nothing better to do. Yet even in the stark desolation of the surrounding plains there was life. The white scuts of gazelle flickered delicately away, and we passed a Beduin camp of black hair tents, the first I had seen in Southern Arabia. But after the encampment there was nothing, and the Bel Harith peered like an ancient mariner at the outline of the hills and at the sun to find his position. Here the going became more difficult, into soft sand, with the landrover changing repeatedly from gear to gear.

For another hour we laboured through the dunes before stopping to eat our sandwiches; it was blindingly hot, without a scrap of shade, the metal of the landrover too blistering to touch. It was then we discovered the loss of one of two water canvas containers called 'chagals' which, being porous, keep water miraculously cool,

especially when hung on the front of a vehicle. The party were unanimous that the missing chagal must have been stolen by soldiers at the Ataq camp. One chagal between eight men on a six-hour desert journey is short ration, but I had not thought the position so desperate that we needed the services of the Bel Harith as a water diviner. Yet as we sat to eat, cursing the thieving tendencies of all soldiers, hot and shadeless in the hollow of a dune, he crouched a little apart and drew his dagger to make a hole in the sand. This he did most neatly, cutting a circle and then scooping it out with his hands to a depth of eight or nine inches.

'What's he doing that for?' said Bashraheel, who, although an able political officer, was no desert man.

My Kazimi was better informed. 'He's looking to see how deep down the water is.'

Bashraheel went across and spoke to our silent guide in an amiable way. 'It looks pretty dry to me,' said Bashraheel, peering into the damp cavity. 'We'll have a long wait before we get a drink here.'

Ahmed Mansur laughed. 'No, he's not expecting it to fill with water to drink. He's looking to see how the grazing is likely to be. They're tremendous experts, these Bel Harith. He can tell, just by looking in that hole, what the grazing is likely to be over this stretch, and how much flood back up the wadi, and when, would be needed to produce grass here, and so on.'

The desert Beduin are water experts, and carry in their heads a permanent graph, as it were, of the water-table in their locality. It is this, plus precise local knowledge of the lie of the ground, which enables them to follow the grazing with their flocks and herds. Like game-tracking, these skills appear to the city-bred outsider as miraculous, but a lifetime spent in these surroundings, plus utter dependence on water and inherited tribal knowledge, can easily produce a reasonable degree of expertise.

Through the intense dry heat of the afternoon we groaned and whined our way through the soft sand, the prospect now restricted by low dunes cutting in faultless arcs against the glaring white-blue of the sky. From the Beduin camp near Ataq to Nuqub, only an hour from the end of our journey, the sole living thing we saw was a camel train carrying, not the fabled incense, not any romantic cargo, but salt from distant Aiyadin, in bulky packages of sacking or straw,

one on each side of each animal. The caravan was linked, nose to tail, in a long string, with a boy or two rocking and dozing on their humpy backs. The leading camel apparently knew the route and proceeded with long pace and padding feet effortlessly over the sand, sneering at us with curled upper lip and supercilious eye as we puffed past in bottom gear.

By five o'clock we had reached the beginnings of cultivation and the hills about the Wadi Beihan had imperceptibly come closer. There were occasional small mud houses of the Bel Harith and tiny fields surrounded by hedges of fierce dry thorn. Here we dropped our guide and finished the last of the water, cursing again, with vehemence, the thief who had stolen our second chagal. I was never so thirsty in my life; the desert sand seemed to have sucked every drop of moisture out of me, and the little water left in the chagal only made me aware how much I could have poured into me had it been available. Fortunately the end was not far distant; an hour to Nuqub, where we could get water, and then another hour to Beihan itself, where we were to stay.

Because we were tired and because there was here only a single track, badly rutted and intolerably dusty – soft alluvial dust from the wadi, more powdery, penetrating and tiresome than desert sand – these last two hours were more wearisome than any before. Through billows of this grey cloud we lurched and thumped to Nuqub, where there was a scattering of growth over the dunes and the wadi was clearly defined between high banks, its bed of white scoured pebbles and grit. Here at the roadside, taking the evening air, we met that most striking of South Arabian figures, Sherif Hussein bin Ahmed al Habili, then Minister of the Interior of the Federal Government, arch-intriguer against the Yemen, distant relative of the Hashemi kings of Jordan and the Sherifs of Mecca. Through bushy black whiskers he beamed at my dusty countenance, 'Welcome, *ya* Foster! Welcome to Beihan! How was your journey?'

I replied to his greeting with some pithy and, indeed, irritable remarks on the state of the roads – and their absence – between Beihan and the coast, with a vehemence which caused him to beam more hugely than ever. He was pleased, he said, that I had travelled by road and not, like so many of his distinguished visitors, by air.

'If they come by air they understand nothing of the country and its

problems. Now you, you are called the *wakil* for development. Now you have seen the road the whole way from Aden, would you not say we needed development?'

The sherif was undoubtedly correct, but money was always short. The territory was dependent on subsidies from the British Treasury; it produced no significant revenue of its own, and of all the needs of this stark and barren land, none was so great as that of roads. It was a project dear to my heart. I had argued always that given improved roads, there would be a pay-off in improved and increased trade – which could be taxed for revenue. There would be improved security; better communications might even make possible a reduction in the armed forces, although this was unlikely since the pay-packets of Arab soldiers were one of the principal oblique aids that Britain extended to this country. But there was never enough money to go round, not in the fifties and sixties, and roads had to take their place in the queue for funds along with agriculture, education, health, fisheries and the rest. The result was a penny-packet division of funds and no really worth while large-scale development in any one direction.

There is at Beihan none of the claustrophobic hostility of Yeshbum. Certainly it lies between high and rocky mountains but they are set back, the wadi here being about two miles wide. Southwards they close in as the wadi twists between the red spurs and headlands, but there is no sense of oppression, while to the north, up and beyond Nuqub, the wadi passes out of the boundaries of the hills into the width and freedom of the open desert. Thus the town is set in a proper relationship to its surroundings, with hills and plain spaced about it, and a dry blue sky above.

The town is not large, less than a mile long, perched on a low mud cliff beside the pebble-white bed of the wadi. The houses are of mud too, mostly of one or two storeys, lower, plainer and less fanciful than those eastwards in Aulaqi, where the Hadhrami influence in building is stronger. There are two or three main streets, unpaved and dusty but with the surprising amenity of electric street lighting, a recent innovation owing much to the enthusiasm of the Political Officer, Lionel Folkard. There are a few simple shops, although these are mostly concentrated in the market, and the streets are given over

to artisans at work, carpenters, sawyers, mechanics making things out of broken motor-cars, dyers and weavers of the locally well-known Beihan carpets – yard-wide strips of crudely woven, crudely patterned goat hair, in black, magenta and green, one of the few indigenous handicrafts or artifacts, but for which even my liking for Beihan cannot induce any enthusiasm.

Perhaps the most unusual trade I saw on my morning walk was the beating of indigo into cloth. Attracted by a heavy wooden thumping, I peered into a small mud hut where squatted three of the palest and dirtiest men I have ever seen in my life. Their pallor presumably results from their confined and sunless occupation in this dark hut, while the dirt was no more than could be expected from anyone having to handle indigo. Each wielded two heavy wooden mallets, thumping with each alternately on a strip of cloth resting on a block, so beating into the very fibre of the material the desired carbon-paper appearance fashionable among the Beduin. In the confined space the noise of the six round-headed mallets was deafening, while the overpowering stench of the indigo recalled for me with nostalgia the stinking and steaming indigo dye-pits of Kano in Nigeria.

The market was a hollow square of shops and stalls, with trade lorries parked in the centre, where the customs men of the amir's administration checked and valued their loads. It would be easy to write it up as though the market were a colourful and romantic scene, but the truth is that commerce here is in very prosaic goods. Kerosene and diesel oil for lighting and irrigation pumps; tinned fish from Japan, cheap kettles, pots and pans from India, cloth, matches, cigarettes: these are the homely exchange of Beihan market. The place is too poor to sustain a more exotic commerce; there are few local artifacts, and agriculture is at little more than subsistence level, with a very small margin for sale, latterly a little cotton. Beihan is too remote and transport costs are too high to make for an export trade, and unless some cosmic change comes about, like the discovery and development of oil, I can see no alteration in this pattern.

In the back alleys of the town, agreeably clean, date-palms spring and overhang the low fawn-coloured houses, close built, small-windowed, where women labour at the deep wells, hauling up the black and dripping goatskins by hair-ropes over squeaking wooden pulleys. I have never grown tired of date-palms. They continued to

please even when I lived among them for six hot months near Basra; their symmetry and colouring, the cross-hatched texture of the trunk and formal tracery of the fronds, from sap-green in the crown, darkening through the plume of side-leaves to pale ochre beneath, the gold of the heavy bunches of fruit, the endless whispering susurrus of the wind in the leaves: singly or in groups, the date-palm is an aesthetic delight. Roy Campbell, the poet, wrote an agreeable verse on the subject of the palm:

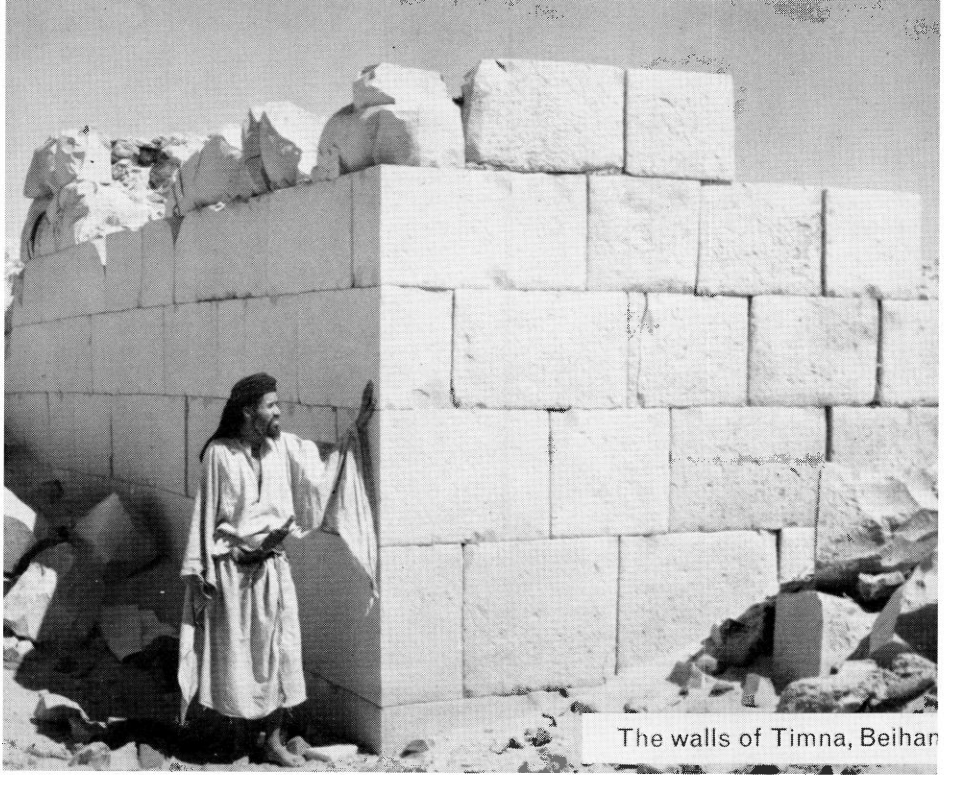
> 'Though I spring from the rock of a region accurst
> Yet fair is the daughter of hunger and thirst
> Who sings like the water the valleys have nursed,
> And rings her blue shadow as deep and as cool
> As the heavens of azure that sleep on a pool. . . .
>
> Your spirit that grieves like the wind in my leaves
> Shall be robbed of its care by those whispering thieves
> To study my patience and hear, the day long
> The soft foliations of sand into song. . . .'

On the outskirts of the town tiny plots of lush lucerne glow against the pale earth of the unirrigated lands, and polled 'ilb trees (*Zizyphus spina-christi*), something like hawthorns, are grown in orchards to provide regular crops of wood in this tree-starved land, as well as a little cherry-like edible fruit. The wood is coarse-grained but, when newly cut, attractively coloured in sienna and ochre. It is very hard: we saw a vast wooden mortar made from the stump of an 'ilb around which a blindfolded camel padded in slow circles, with blinkers of plaited green straw, turning a gigantic pestle in a primitive flourmill.

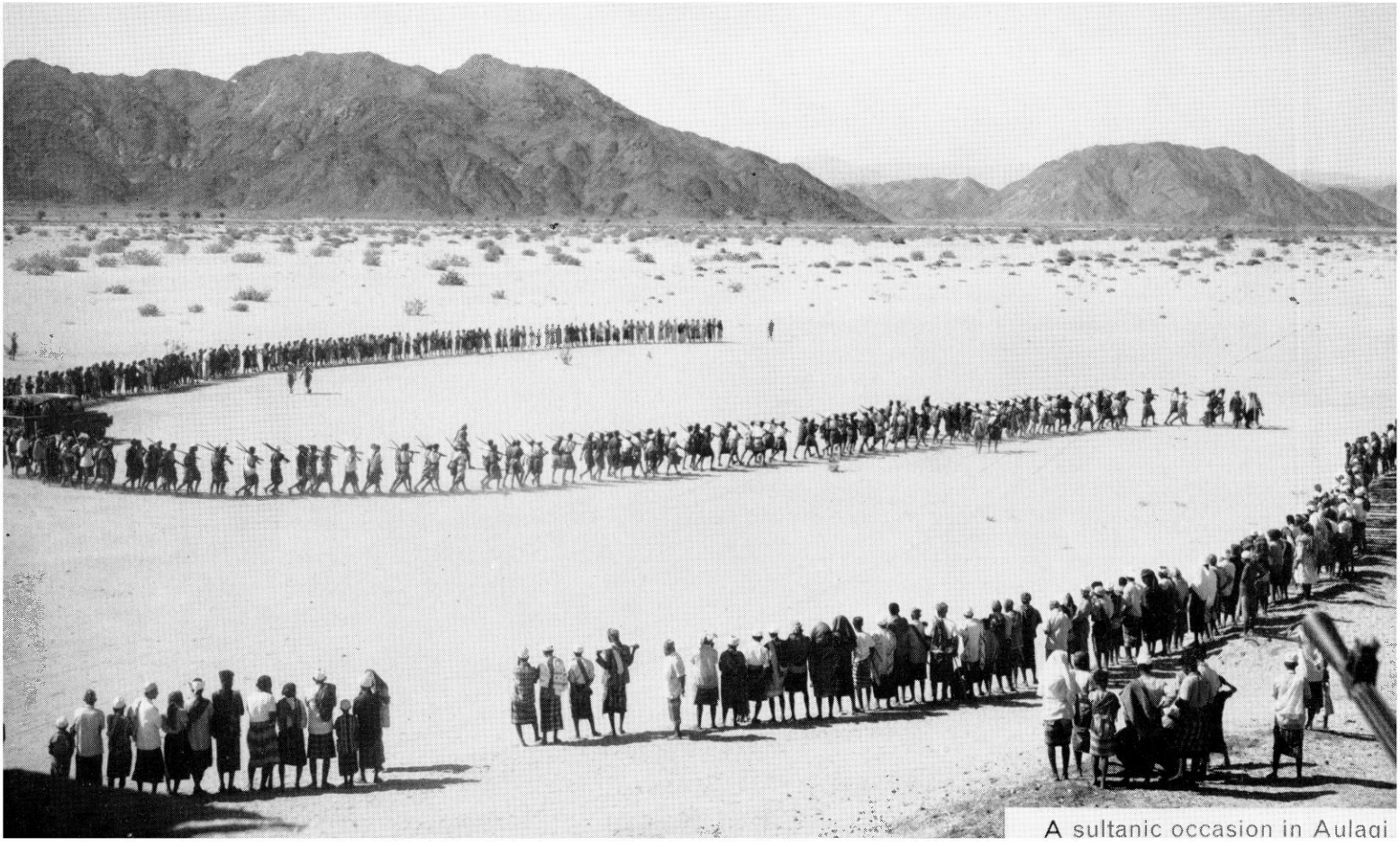
At the State Treasury I was invited to inspect the State Reserves, a large bundle of grubby bank notes and a bag of silver dollars. 'Every cent is accounted for,' I was told with justifiable pride, since such accountancy and such reponsibility for public moneys is a recent and tender plant in South Arabia. The bag was untied and across the floor spilled a wealth of silver, one of the most handsome and unusual coins in the world, the Maria Theresa thaler, or dollar.

Curious it is to find that the common currency of the Arabian interior is an antique Austrian coin, bearing the effigy of a Holy Roman Empress, minted in London at the present day, yet dated 1780. It is thought to have been introduced by Dutch traders early in

Tribesmen of the eastern districts



The walls of Timna, Beihan



A sultanic occasion in Aulagi

the seventeenth century, Holland then being part of the Holy Roman Empire. From south-west Arabia it penetrated to Ethiopia and throughout the Red Sea littoral, where its popularity has maintained itself against the attempts of various local rulers to supplant it with currencies of their own. Not even the Turks, in their long dominion of the Arabian peninsula, succeeded in supplanting the dollar, although they did the next best thing and superimposed on it a cartouche of the reigning sultan. The dollars in use in the Middle East bear no effigy other than that of the great Empress Maria Theresa with the date 1780. Possibly her fame and the length of her reign were thought by the primitive people of these regions to lend a value to the coins that later and lesser monarchs could not impart to their coinage, so that for the purpose of Middle Eastern trade they continued to be minted. A more ribald suggestion is that it owed its continuing popularity to the impressive swell of décolleté bosom displayed by the empress.

The Amir Saleh, son of Sherif Hussein and ruler of Beihan, was one of my closest friends among the rulers, and one of the most likeable of them, a young man in his early thirties. While still an infant he was appointed ruler by his grandfather, the venerable and respected Sherif Ahmed, the great peacemaker of these parts. Avoiding succession disputes between his two ebullient and strong-willed sons, the Sherifs Awadh and Hussein, he bestowed on them a divided regency, which worked well enough until Saleh came of age and took over his inheritance. He and I discovered very early in our acquaintance a mutual trust and even affection: he is frank, open, warm-hearted and generous, possessing a keen sense of humour and of the ridiculous.

Together we toured his domain for two or three days: out past the great red dunes to the frontier posts beyond Nejd Marqad, clambering up to isolated hard-lying pickets and watch-towers; up the wadi through the villages and crops of the Masabein under the nipple peak of Raidan, site of pre-Islamic fertility rites said to persist even today; through the tamarisk scrub in the yellow light of dawn after quail, busy pecking for undigested grains among the camel-turds on the track. We lunched with his father, Sherif Hussein, at the vast stucco palace at Nuqub, where in a charmingly unrehearsed and, for Arabia, almost unique fashion we surprised one of Hussein's daughters, a

maiden of twelve, bathing nude in the swimming pool. She squeaked with surprise and scampered off into the shadows, dripping across the hot cement, giggling joyously as we roared with laughter. Hussein talked oil, Saleh, more realistically, talked budget, and I talked whenever I could get a word in between these two talkative potentates. Bashraheel helped occasionally with the Arabic, but this was not often necessary since the Beihan people, especially those of breeding, speak a notably pure and attractive Arabic, easy to understand and unlike the thicker accents of the coastal tribes.

We spoke also of the proposal to establish in Beihan a reserve for the fast disappearing Arabian oryx, for the saving of which the Fauna Preservation Society mounted an expedition and captured three, now doing well in the deserts of Arizona. They were captured far to the east, on the fringes of the Empty Quarter, but it was presumed that this rare and attractive animal roamed westwards as far as Beihan and could be kept there.

After lunch we visited nearby Kohlan, the site of Timna, capital of the ancient Himyaritic kingdom of Qataban; as might be expected, it is a mound and there is little enough to see, the Arabs now destroying what the years have preserved. The principal spectacle is a gateway of massive stone blocks, some nine or ten feet high, the entrance perhaps twelve feet wide. The quality of the masonry is surprisingly accomplished, the huge grey blocks squared and morticed with a precision you will not find in modern Arabian workmanship. The Arab officer of the Federal Guard who accompanied us told me that a race of giants had built the ancient city: how else, he said, could these huge stones have been placed? But Haddar, the lively Hassani soldier, with that absence of respect for rank which is a tribesman's privilege, told him he was quite mistaken and that it was not giants but demons – *shaiyyatin* – that had built the place. Both of these intelligent men were perfectly serious: beneath the major's crowns of rank was a tribesman, as behind Haddar's smart-alec ways.

Qataban was one of several ancient south Arabian kingdoms known to the Greeks as a source of the substantial incense trade. Its inhabitants were not the producers of the expensive luxury, but *entrepreneurs* and caravaneers: the commodity itself was gathered in Dhofar, eastwards towards Muscat, or in the Horn of Africa, what is now Somalia. There is academic bickering about the details of the

trade routes by which it reached these southern fringes of the great desert before heading north, by routes more firmly established, through Jauf and Nejran, to the Mediterranean. It appears probable that the Dhofar incense came by sea to ancient Qana, now the little Wahidi port of Bir Ali, and thence by one or more of several alternative ways through the mountains either to Shabwa, then an important junction where routes from the Hadhramaut met others from the coast, or directly to Timna, thence to Marib, capital of the ancient Saba, or Sheba, now in the Yemen.

The decline of the inland kingdoms set in when the incense trade became seaborne through the Red Sea. There were Greek ships engaged in it by the first century B.C., as attested by that remarkable set of Greek sailing directions 'The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea'. There are at least three theories for the change in the pattern of trade, but whatever the cause, the southern kingdoms began to feel the economic draught from the loss of this once profitable trade, and if not the sole reason, this must have been a factor in their decline, which had set in by the first century B.C. During the boom years – perhaps 300 B.C. to 100 B.C. – these remote states had prospered, as is evidenced by the extent and quality of their buildings and irrigation works. The import of high quality building stone, alabaster and marble, is further evidence of the relative sophistication of these ancient peoples. Perhaps the best indication that they were at least reputed wealthy is that they attracted the greedy attention of Imperial Rome, whose Augustus, in 24 B.C., launched into the wastes a legion under Aelius Gallus. Like many who came after him, poor Aelius found nothing in Arabia except sand and heat and toil and death. He reached the neighbouring Marib, the site of Himyaritic remains more striking than those at Timna, notably a great dam, but there, after an unsuccessful siege, he turned back for lack of water.

With the dusty departure of Aelius Gallus and his legion, the interior of southern Arabia sank into well-deserved obscurity; while Aden and the coast remained known to the West virtually without a break from ancient times, Qataban and Sheba, through all the eroding centuries, lay desolate and unknown. Their script was first seen in Europe in 1811, the several variations being generally described as Himyaritic. There has been little systematic archaeological research, and apart from the dam at Marib, the gate at Timna and

Neqb al Hajjar in Wahidi, there are no sizable or picturesque remains.

A number of carved alabaster pieces have survived – on an afternoon visit the amir presented me with the best of the heads there available – and the Aden Museum has a fair collection. But many of the best pieces have been disposed of without record, to army and other officers, by local people with no knowledge of their value, and until recently there has been no attempt to control this traffic.

If I seem to be deprecatory in this account of ancient South Arabia, I must add that there is authoritative support for it in the report on *Archaeology in the Aden Protectorate* by G. Lankester Harding, formerly Director of Antiquities in Jordan.* He writes:

> 'With the exception of capital cities such as Shabwa and Timna the sites are small – hardly large enough to be called towns – and bear but little evidence of wealth and the aesthetic appreciation which goes with it. Objects in the Muncherjee Collection (now in the Aden Museum) from some of the royal tombs of Ausan give a good idea of the wealth and luxury enjoyed by the highest in the land, and it is no more than average; it cannot compare in any way with contemporary Egypt, Mesopotamia or Greece. The stories of the fabulous wealth, luxury and antiquity of Arabia Felix, started apparently in Roman times, must, on the available evidence, be taken with a large lump of Shabwa salt.'

He continues with scathing references to the plundering which has gone on, in particular at the ancient cemetery adjacent to Timna, which he described as resembling, from the ravages of loot-greedy local diggers, 'a bombed site the morning after the bombing'.

Having agitated for many years for more control of such scanty relics as this bleak territory could produce, I find it agreeable to conclude on a more optimistic note. As a Secretariat officer I was responsible for initiating the idea of the archaeological survey carried out by Lankester Harding. For years a proposal to create a Department of Antiquities had dragged on without result. When the file finally landed on my table, I suggested that if, through ignorance of the scope and potential of archaeology in the territory, we did not wish to run the risk of setting up a permanent department, we might

*H.M.S.O., 1963

at least afford to have an expert come out and advise us. The idea was approved, I drew up an estimate, and in the fullness of time Harding arrived to produce his admirable report. As a result a permanent Department of Antiquities was established, and although we no longer speculate so agreeably about vanished 'empires' and Golconda-like wealth waiting to be dug up, at least South Arabia's jejune remains are protected.

A camel-lancer of the Federal Army

CHAPTER XII

THE MERGER AND AFTER

Threshold of Independence

To conclude the sketch of the political background begun in earlier chapters, here is a résumé of events in South Arabia from the forming of the Federation in 1959 until 1967, the eve of independence. Significant features are:

the accession of Protectorate states to the Federation
the accession of Aden
the consequences of the Yemen revolution
the terrorist campaign and the suspension of the Aden Constitution
the collapse of the Federation.

Accessions of Protectorate states to the original six of the Federation followed regularly from 1959 onwards: possibly the most significant was that of Lahej, under its new sultan, Fadhl bin Ali, in October 1959. Among the states of the Western Protectorate, Lahej had ever been a special case and had under recent rulers been notably unco-operative with the British. Other states presented fewer problems and the advantages of membership were so evident that

there was no difficulty in obtaining further recruits: rather the difficulty lay in accepting for membership small states whose administrations were so rudimentary that the Federation was obliged to shoulder further responsibilities, financial, administrative, military and technical. As soon as a new state had joined, it expected all manner of services – roads, hospitals, agricultural schemes – to be promptly provided to which previously it had not aspired.

Whatever the administrative and financial difficulties, however, accessions from 1959 onwards brought into the Federation the greater part of the Western Aden Protectorate, even if some of the member states were barely in authority in their own domains. The Federation's frontiers extended from the Red Sea coast to the boundaries of Quaiti, the only state remaining unfederated being the Upper Yafai Sultanate, a congeries of inaccessible and ungoverned petty sheikhdoms. But it would be dishonest to allow the reader to assume that with membership all but complete, the authority of the Federation was at once effective, or even recognized, throughout the states. Great tracts remained insecure, no less than when the British played the game of political officers.

None the less, on balance, the picture presented by the Federation had more in it of cheer than of gloom. For all its faults and flaws, fallacies and falsenesses, the Federation was an achievement, a step forward, offering to its members and their peoples a better, fuller and more dignified life than they could have expected, or were enjoying, under the formerly untrammelled autocracy of the rulers.

Whether the rulers federated to save their own skins, whether the British compelled them to federate in the narrow interests of British defence policy – these hypotheses are irrelevant if the judgment is to be based, as it should be, on the welfare of the people. In that sense the Federation deserved support, and in the hope that with time it would evolve a more enlightened constitution and democratic practice.

But if the accession of the states of the interior – excluding those of the Eastern Protectorate, which persisted in their refusal to join – was relatively successful, a different tale must be told of the accession of Aden, an event known locally as the 'merger', and as such I shall refer to it. On one hand was a British Crown Colony heading for internal self-government and ultimately independence, with a hundred years of British-type institutions of government – justice,

social services, a balanced budget; on the other, the anarchic interior, stuck together in an unconvincing Federation, ruled by autocratic sheikhs and sultans, with minimal governmental services, an armed tribal population, chronic insecurity, and wholly dependent on a British grant-in-aid.

The two areas had, during the British regime, diverged from each other, administratively and politically. Though linked by ties of geography, history and race, yet by the 1950s there was little significant communication between them. Aden's labour force was principally Yemeni, not from the Protectorate. Its entrepot trade was concerned more with the Yemen and Somali coast than with its own hinterland. Its civil service, British and local, although theoretically interchangeable, rarely interchanged with the handful of political officers, doctors and agriculturists who constituted the advisory services to the interior. Its political parties, small in size, influence and responsibility, were yet freely associated bodies with no counterpart in the feudal interior. Most conspicuously perhaps, Aden's trade unions, introduced, advised and encouraged by the British, were now the most coherent political force in Aden (and the most truly free trade union movement in the Middle East); they had no counterpart in the interior and were to its rulers a most alien movement.

In spite of these divergences, natural affinities and the post-war stimulus to unity throughout the Arab world made it inevitable that the future of the territory should be seen to lie in combining the two sections of Colony and Protectorate, first with the Western Protectorate, that is, the Federation, and later, it was hoped, with the Eastern Protectorate's three states. The days of the British clearly were numbered – whether they remained for ten or twenty years, it was evident that sooner or later they would leave – and the question of merger became an issue during the 1950s. The talks preliminary to the formation of the Federation had made consideration of the question inevitable, focusing attention on the danger that the two parts might develop so far on separate paths towards independence that merger might be difficult. A Federation without Aden, without an outlet to the sea, lacking control over the principal city and port of the region, was as anomalous as would be an independent Aden cut off by the Federation from its trade links with the Yemen, and potentially threatened by the more numerous – and armed –

population of the Federation. Moreover, Aden had no military forces: the Federation, inheriting as a Regular Army the Aden Protectorate Levies and the former Government Guards, had a brigade-strength army and a similar force of gendarmerie. To progress farther on separate paths was clearly to head for trouble, including trouble for Britain, who at that time was proclaiming her need of the Aden military base to meet her worldwide commitments and to protect Persian Gulf oil.

The military base was not a particularly accommodating one, but with the evacuation of the Canal Zone, civil war in Cyprus, and East African independence rendering stillborn the concept of a southern defence line, the Aden base had acquired a scarcity value. It was better than no base at all, and there was also its denial value; that is, Aden should be denied to any potentially hostile power since its location astride the principal east-west shipping route could be dangerous. Thus it was argued in the 1950s and there is material for reflection on the ephemeral quality of policies, announced with all the definition and permanence of the Ten Commandments, only to be brushed aside within two or three years as valueless; for so it has been with British Government utterances on the question of the Aden base. By 1968 it was abandoned, and apparently this will make no great difference to the nation's security. That circumstances change – for example, developments of longer range aircraft – and make necessary continuous adjustments of policy is obvious; but is there not something alarming about such total reversals of policy?

While in Britain's interest to bring about the merger, and the Federation's to acquire Aden's port, it was less clear how merger would benefit Aden. Under the Federal Constitution she would be but one among a number of states, with no more voting power than the smallest sheikhdom. Because of the divergent historical development of Colony from Protectorate, Aden would find itself a modern urban democratic minority of one in an antique, rural and reactionary majority.

Of the negotiations leading to Aden's agreement to the merger, details are of interest only to the specialists; for the general reader I must be brief. It may be recalled that the 1959 Aden elections were boycotted by the sole political group of any power, the trades unions' People's Socialist Party, in protest against the limitations of the

franchise which excluded its supporters, the immigrant Yemeni labourers. Their exclusion was entirely justified for they were a transitory population retaining roots – indeed homes and families – in the Yemen (where certainly they had no voting rights!). The effect of the boycott was to permit control of the Aden Legislative Council by moderates and moderate independents, several owning allegiance to Bayoomi's United National Party, a locally orientated Adeni middle-class group. The U.N.P. favoured merger on certain conditions, which recognized Aden's special position by increased representation in the Federal Council (Parliament) and a greater number of Ministerial appointments than enjoyed by other member states. There were difficult technical problems, of finance, customs, the public service and so on, but these by various compromises and devices were overcome and in September 1962, two days before revolution broke out in the Yemen, the Aden Legislative Council passed the motion for merger, Bayoomi and his elected supporters outvoting the opposition on an anti-merger amendment by a very narrow seven-to-five margin. (The Government-nominated members and the *ex officio* vote increased the figures to show a larger pro-merger majority, but it is the voting of the elected members which most fairly shows the voting pattern.)

The opposition, although boycotting elections, had not allowed the merger movement to progress unchallenged, and there were strikes, demonstrations, intimidation and, on the day of the Council's debate, rioting. Nor was the opposition confined to the left-wing trade union movement. It extended to the liberal intellectuals, including the influential newspaper-owning Luqman family, a likeable and able clan whose members were strategically distributed among the press and the civil service.

Against these opposing forces Bayoomi and his supporters had a bare but sufficient majority, and with the motion safely passed, the accession of Aden was formalized in January 1963. Provision was made in the treaty, uniquely in respect of Aden, giving leave for Aden to ask Britain to withdraw it from the Federation after six years it if believed its interests prejudiced and if its Legislative Council voted to do so by a two-thirds majority.

Had the Yemen revolution broken out two days earlier, it is unlikely that the pro-merger motion would have been passed, since at

least some of its supporters would have been intimidated, or at least discouraged, by the stimulus given to the left-wing Yemeni-labourer People's Socialist Party, overjoyed at the end of the imamic tyranny. With, they hoped, a reformist republican government in power in the Yemen, union with Aden was brought a step nearer, although their spokesmen were never able clearly to explain how this was to be effected across the intervening Protectorate (Federated) states. Presumably they hoped, in some cloudy fashion, for similar popular uprisings in the states. However, their jubilation was both too late and too early: too late to affect Aden's decision for merger and too early in view of the subsequent troubles of the inconclusive Yemen revolution.

A principal result of the revolution was to bring to South Arabia for nearly five years the presence of an Egyptian army, to the very frontiers of the Federation. Egyptian Mig planes strafed Beihan; Egyptian artillery shelled across the frontier from Qataba and into Audhali; more dangerously, Egyptian-trained terrorists made their presence felt in Aden with increasing effect. The lack of success of Egyptian arms against the Royalists should not obscure their ability at subversive warfare, propaganda and terrorism. In Aden, from December 1963, bomb explosions became an almost daily occurrence. On 10th December, at Aden airport, a grenade was thrown at the High Commissioner and a party of Ministers departing for London; two were killed and fifty injured, including myself. A State of Emergency was proclaimed but its stringent provisions did not prevent a continuance of terrorism in Aden – bombs, murders, explosive parcels, sabotage. With the intimidation of the Aden police by the murder of a number of their officers, and the unsettling effect of the retirement of experienced British officers in the interests of 'arabizing' the force, the chances of bringing terrorism to an end became increasingly remote.

Nor was the terrorism confined to Aden: subversion of up-country elements continued, with ambushes, land-mines, bazooka-attacks on the homes of British officials. In the spring of 1964 the Quteibi, whom the reader may recall as the Wolves of Radfan, were encouraged to interfere with traffic on the Dhala road, a traditional pastime, and required a brigade of British troops to reduce them to order, a degree of attention which must have puffed the pride of those

not unlikeable individualists, accustomed to oposition from no more than a platoon of Levies.

Meanwhile, elections in Aden on a wider franchise had been held in 1964, the People's Socialist Party of the trade unions still boycotting the poll. They resulted in a victory for the moderates, and Seiyid Zain Baharoon, who had succeeded as Chief Minister on Bayoomi's death in 1963, again headed the Council of Ministers. But there were hostile, anti-moderate men among those elected, including the gentleman who had been arrested following the airport bomb outrage on suspicion of complicity and who was actually in detention during his canditature and election! Baharoon did not last long; following failure to agree on the terms and composition of yet another conference to be held in London, he resigned and was succeeded by a western-educated businessman Mr. Makkawi, whose leadership proved embarrassing since he and his Council refused co-operation with the High Commissioner and with the Federal Supreme Council. All progress was hindered, constitutional, political and technical, the object being to make political capital in Aden.

This impasse might have been more difficult to break had it not been for the extreme lengths to which the Makkawi Government took its non-co-operation, but in August 1965 it overreached itself when it refused to condemn two brutal murders of British officials. By so doing, and by refusing co-operation in the security measures made necessary by these latest crimes – they were not the first – Makkawi rendered himself vulnerable to constitutional reprisal, and this was taken by the High Commissioner in suspending the Aden Constitution. For the last two years of British rule, Aden was administered by officials: attempts to obtain the participation of responsible Arabs in even an advisory capacity to Government failed. The Aden Arabs can hardly be blamed: co-operation with the British spelt political disaster, and the risk of assassination.

Nasser's hostility to the British-sponsored Federation was clear, and was but the latest round in his sustained policy of driving the British completely from all influence in the Middle East. It was easier for him than fighting the Jews, since the British were so vulnerable a target, and the Israeli Jews, besides being a tough and a determined people, had behind them the resources of the United States. Nevertheless his policy has been successful only in part: the Nasser image

was at a nadir in 1965, when the failure of his Yemen intervention was plain for all to see and his policies elsewhere – notably in Jordan and Saudi Arabia – had been less than successful. The disastrous war with Israel in 1967 further depreciated his effectiveness, compelling his withdrawal from the ill-starred Yemen adventure. But the Nasser image and his brand of revolutionary socialism remain powerful, and the split-level of Arab political consciousness is capable of viewing sardonically Egyptian failure in the Yemen while cheering for him at the irrational and emotional level. Thus the British withdrawal, long forecast though it has been, is easily made to appear a retreat before resurgent nationalism under Egyptian banners.

From the summer of 1965, despite British attempts to bring all parties to conference and compromise, the situation progressively deteriorated, the Aden element either hostile, to the British as well as to the Federation, or frightened – of the Egyptian-supported terrorists as well as of the Federal Rulers; the rulers uncertain of British intentions, uncertain of each other (a number kept up secret communication with the anti-British exiles in Cairo), uncertain of the loyalty of the Federal Army, itself divided by tribe and again within tribes, especially the numerous and faction-ridden Aulaqi; and the British, from 1964 under a Socialist Government, unhappily saddled with an unworkable Federation, a military base of doubtful value, an irredentist Yemeni population in Aden and a desire to come to better terms with Egypt.

British determination to combat terrorism – which continued in spite of the suspension of the Aden Constitution, the imposition of a State of Emergency and the presence of increasing numbers of British troops – seemed paralysed. While many suspected terrorists were rounded up and detained, few convictions were obtained, ostensibly for lack of evidence, at a time when grenade incidents were a daily occurrence. Compared with British action against terrorism in Malaya, Kenya and elsewhere, the record, despite the endurance and ability of the troops, was futile.

The choice before Britain was not clear. To support the Federation would involve her in years of expense and unpopularity, and, if the past record was anything to judge by, would be thankless, of indefinite term and uncertain success. But if Britain abandoned her

rule and her military presence in the region – and the Aden base had enabled Britain to thwart a threatened Iraqi take-over of Kuwait in 1961 – were her oil interests, her vast and profitable investment in the Middle East placed in jeopardy? Yet other nations obtained Middle Eastern oil without a military presence in the region, although it could be argued that they were enabled to do so by Britain's stabilizing presence. Again, the oil sheikhdoms needed a market for the oil as badly as the buyers needed the product, while oil from less unstable areas of the world was becoming available in increasing quantities. Apart from oil, what was Britain's responsibility for a territory where she had been dominant for over a hundred years? Had she not responsibility for ensuring a hand-over of an ordered government and administration or could she, as did Belgium in the Congo, cut and run, leaving chaos?

In 1966 the Wilson Government took the decision to quit entirely, lock, stock and barrel, not only granting independence to the Federation by 1968 but also withdrawing the British military base. This decision was in direct contradiction to the White Paper (Cmd. 2414) of 1964, issued after a conference in London with Federal leaders, in which it is stated: 'The [Federal] delegates asked that Britain should agree to independence for the Federation, *while continuing thereafter to assist in its defence.* They requested that as soon as practicable the British Government should convene a conference for the purpose of fixing a date for independence not later than 1968, and of concluding a Defence Agreement under which Britain would retain her military base in Aden *for the defence* of the Federation and the fulfilment of her worldwide responsibilities. *The Secretary of State announced the agreement of the British Government to this request'* (author's italics). This agreement was made while the Tory Government was in office, but Mr. Wilson, leader of the Socialists, meeting the Federal leaders after the conference, assured them that if Labour won the 1964 election he would honour the agreement. It is difficult to see how he reconciled this with his later abandonment of the base.

In the light of this betrayal, the dismay of the Federal rulers was extreme and their confidence in the Socialist Government totally destroyed. Without British aid, and especially defence aid, the Federation was doomed. In the year between the summers of 1966

and 1967, Federal Ministers absented themselves more and more from South Arabia, with or without pretext, finding refuge in exile in Saudi Arabia or Lebanon or London. By the summer of 1967 the Federation had ceased to exist: a cadre of Arab civil servants, and a diminishing number of British Colonial Service officers to advise them, carried on a skeleton administration amid increasing terrorism. The Federal armed forces, the crucial factor in the dismaying scene, gave signs of internal stresses, torn by tribal allegiances, the uncertainty of personal careers and a strong current of genuinely reformist, or opportunist, anti-traditional spirit.

Meanwhile the terrorists had polarized into two groups, the National Liberation Front (N.L.F.) and the Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen (F.L.O.S.Y.), the latter being the terrorist wing of the Aden Trade Union Congress, the former less clearly identifiable, but both supported, in varying degrees, by Egypt. Fighting broke out in Aden and its environs between these two during the last months of Britain's rule in 1967, the N.L.F. finally, if only temporarily, gained the upper hand to the point at which the British Government recognized it as a party, or movement, sufficiently clearly established to negotiate the hand-over of power. The Federal Army, after declining to take over power from the collapsing Federation, came out – by no means unanimously – in support of the N.L.F.

It is a tale of unparalleled tragedy, the renunciation of responsibility, the breaking of promises, the handing over of a country in no way ready for independence to obscure groups whose sole political training had been in thuggery and violence, not only against the British but against political rivals: a country without natural resource, its commerce destroyed, its civil and military services dependent for their pay on foreign subsidy – which the British must continue or see an even worse fate befall their former dependants.

After the long and not dishonourable record of Britain's decolonization, from India through Malaya, the Gold Coast and the rest, only in an Arab territory – Palestine in 1948 – did Britain leave chaos comparable to that in South Arabia. The Arabs themselves are far from blameless: in round after round of fruitless negotiations, no compromises were made, no evidence of responsibility was displayed either by the rulers or by the Aden politicians, while Egypt, under Nasser, must carry a major part of the blame for the distress brought

about during the last unhappy years of British rule. In the long perspective of history, the tranquil years – 124 of them – of British rule should outweigh the turmoil of the last four. Britain gained only marginal direct economic advantage from Aden and the Protectorate; the territory received infinitely more in British aid than Britain gained in trade. Britain's gain was strategic, first in the defence of the routes to India and Australasia, latterly of her oil interests, shared with other Western powers, in the Persian Gulf.

Eastern landscape, Wahidi

CHAPTER XIII

ADEN AGAIN

In an earlier chapter I mentioned the five strands in the texture of Aden, and said something of the rock, the port and the interior: here is something of the other two, the British and the climate. The latter is enduring, the former transitory, yet their mark will long remain on the Aden landscape after they have departed, and some account of their presence, their buildings and their society is justified.

If, when disembarking at Prince of Wales Pier, a visitor had turned right instead of heading for the shops of the Crescent, he could have spent the hours ashore without encountering an Arab, among British faces, British buildings, and under conspicuously British flags flown from the neighbouring hilltop residences of His Excellency the High Commissioner, the Commander-in-Chief and the £40,000 shanty of the Rear-Admiral. He would have passed a church of emphatically Victorian vintage, gleaming with plaques of polished marble in memory of departed officers, tropical only in the electric

fans hanging from the high-pitched roof. The church bell is hung, charmingly, in a little detached kiosk of stone and fretted wood on a rocky hillside, beside ancient gun emplacements. He would have encountered barracks, canteens, guard-rooms, officers' clubs and all the expensive paraphernalia that went with that obsolescent anachronism, an overseas military base. The only Arabs he would have seen would have been servants and washermen, staggering under bundles of laundry. There were sweating Tommies in khaki drill, plump lasses of the women's corps giggling with their boy-friends outside their closely guarded camp, the thud of football games and cricket on matting wickets. The rocky peninsula bristled with signal masts and coastal guns and barbed wire, almost the last of the outposts of Empire.

But during the last years of their rule much of the glory had departed. The Queen's Birthday Parade, formerly an annual feature of the Aden scene, was relegated from the prominence of Steamer Point to the parade-ground of the cantonment, unprovocatively distant from Arab crowds. At the relatively cool hour of 7.30 a.m., around a glaring expanse of salt-white gypsum, the society of Aden would assemble in its best hats and suitings, government officials seated with meticulous regard to the Order of Precedence, heads of business houses, senior military officers, and the Roman Catholic Bishop in a white soutane with a dashing magenta sash.

We administrators, very much the last of the Sanders of the River men, were required to turn out in full uniform – white drill tunic, high collar with gorgets of gold lace, medals, white gloves, buckskin shoes and sword, the whole confection crowned with an enormous Kitchener-vintage sun-helmet. I disliked intensely wearing this costume. It was not especially smart, quite apart from the attitudes implicit in dressing civil servants in a garb recalling the stirring days of Omdurman or the annexation of Scinde. But I liked the sword: it hangs on the wall, and I shall bequeath it, rather solemnly, to my elder son. It is only a toy one, a gilt court-sword in a rapier-thin black scabbard, with a flourish of gold lace and a tassel at the hilt, Although unused from one Queen's Birthday to the next, the swords were apt to disintegrate in the Aden climate or from termites. Lacking the brass tip to the scabbard, so that six pointed inches of naked steel projected to the danger of his wife's dress and his own calves, a

friend attended the parade for several years with his sword-tip masked with a champagne cork.

A film company would have leapt to buy exclusive rights to the parade, so antique, so anachronistic its atmosphere. Beneath beetling rocks and under the steaming sun, past the saluting dais, swung red-turbaned police, camel-lancers in green turbans and with fluttering pennons, the dramatically accoutred Federal Guard, tribesmen wearing black turbans and black belts and curious flapping sandals, pennon-garnished armoured cars, artillerymen in their ritualistic postures firing saluting guns, smoke wreathing slowly through the hot air. For an extra fee the cameramen might have been permitted shots of His Excellency, as uncomfortable in his uniform as I in mine, with the added burden to his helmet of a crest of red and white cock's feathers (a West African colleague explains that the Colonial Office chose cock's feathers as being powerful ju-ju in the black heart of Africa), taking the salute to the improbable strains, tootled by a swarthy Arab band, of 'Sussex by the Sea'. (It was always 'Sussex by the Sea', a triumph for some forgotten British bandmaster who dragooned and batoned a distant generation of Arab bandsmen into accomplishing this homely rhythm. The Queen's Birthday Parade, the opening of the Legislative Council, the close of Ramadan – out came the Arab band trumpeting its way through 'Sussex by the Sea'.)

With the disappearance of the colonial empires, the conception of a governor – in Aden he was not a High Commissioner until 1963 – who actually governed is unfamiliar and will fast recede into imperial history. But in Africa and the Far East, India and the Sudan, in territories formerly British, French, Dutch or Belgian – not forgetting the Turks – there were governors wielding most extensive authority, usually colonial officials crowning the end of tropic service with a brief taste of glory. They are a breed all but vanished now, but were very much part of the Aden scene under the British. Their powers were extensive, their responsibilities considerable.

During my time in Aden governors were a mixed bag, for Aden never fitted happily into the Colonial Office pattern and its variety of governors reflects its scrambled ancestry, governors coming to Aden from the Indian Political Service, from the Sudan, from the Foreign Service and only rarely from the Colonial Service. Their

work was hard, but they were surrounded by protocol of near-royal quality. If when visiting Aden you had been met by a punctilious friend he would have taken you, as soon as you stepped ashore, to 'sign the book', a visitors book kept in a little kiosk at the gates of Government House. Down a driveway, past Arab and British sentries, you would have glimpsed a modern façade, an ancient cannon and a wide-stepped entrance. Here one assembled for one's ration of G.H. (Government House) invitations, their frequency and nature depending on seniority. There might be a couple of cocktail parties a year, perhaps a lunch or dinner with some distinguished visitor connected with one's work: one delirious occasion was a champagne ball, a tremendous success on which the governor spent in one evening his entertainment allowance for two years! He was, deservedly, the most popular – and able – governor of my time. But oh! what anguish, what envy, what heart-burning was caused by those so-trivial marks of recognition, those G.H. invitations, to those who found they Hadn't Been Asked!

As in the Colonial Service and the armed forces, the British dominated in commerce and the oil world. Their common meeting ground and former citadel, now in decline, was the Union Club. While the whole of Aden reeked of the decay of Empire – or was it the drains? – no locality exuded so pungent an atmosphere as the Union Club. Under its Malabar tiles and Bombay finials, behind its sun-faded wooden jalousies, through the cast-iron curlicues of its sagging verandahs, it was the epitome of the British club in the tropics. If a comedy-film company could have used the Birthday Parade, a drama unit would have made a fine investment by taking over the club as a permanent set. Without alteration it could have staged Somerset Maugham's tropical plays, or the Graham Greene expatriate novels, or the Tondelayo story, or the opening of Conrad's *Lord Jim* – which was in fact set in Aden.

Within its trellised entrance, behind the *porte-cochère*, rose a shallow stairway of creaking steps. Notice-boards hung beside it, shabby and unpainted, with tattered green baize, rusty drawing pins and torn notices. Gymkhanas, new library books, recommended ayahs (nursemaids), polo matches: the subject matter was that of the British Raj in India of the great days, but in Aden it had a hangdog, down-at-heel look. Aden polo was not the same as at Lahore; Aden

memsahibs weren't a patch on the pukka Peshawar species; Aden curries could not compare with those of Bombay. There was a Caledonian Society poster about the Burns' Night Dinner, when we all foregathered, Scots, would-be Scots, bogus Scots and, like myself, Scotch-lovers, to eat air-freighted haggis and drink Atholl Brose. The British Legion Aden Branch summoned its men to sell poppies during Remembrance Week. The Women's Voluntary Service sought ladies to distribute powdered milk to Arab mothers.

At the stair-head stretched a long evocative verandah behind a balustrade of Victorian ironwork, looking across the harbour to the peaks of Little Aden. Tatty and shabby, the verandah was yet wholly agreeable. Close by was a constant movement of ships – liners and tankers and destroyers and dhows, tugs and launches and sailing dinghies: an animated scene. Behind it was the dance floor and a shabby bar, the air-conditioning ineffectual, the servants scruffy, the floor unswept. Dispirited sprays of artificial flowers hung awry from wall-brackets. You could have heard calls of 'Boy!' or 'Steward!' or, more rarely, the old Anglo-Indian summons of 'Koi Hai!' and turbanned waiters in untidy shirts would bring rounds of canned beer and gins-and-tonics. Here met the bank officials, Government men from the High Commission, businessmen from the shipping firms, pilots from the local airline and the harbour pilotage, commercial travellers – they called themselves 'Middle East representatives' – from Nairobi and Khartoum, an occasional army or R.A.F. officer.

What did they talk about, these latter-day sahibs? Frequently, the heat, usually with meiosis: 'Bit sticky today' – the thermometer would be in the high nineties, the humidity also. The state of business: 'Half the bloody cargo fell off the lighter – gave 3½% discount – they're putting Viscounts on the Bahrein run.' Of politics: 'He's a Minister now but I knew him as a crooked accounts clerk – there was a bomb in Sheikh Othman last night – they'll have to alter the franchise if they want the Yemenis in.' Of service and salaries: 'Getting an acting allowance for six months – three passages a year for wife and kids – sales bonus – free electricity and water – contract not renewed.'

At the club they held their occasions: the New Year's Eve fancy-dress dance – remember when the drunk A.D.C. set light to the grass hula-skirt? – the children's Christmas party, with Santa Claus,

suffocating in red robes and false whiskers, arriving by helicopter or camel or fire engine – Burns' Night and St. Andrew's Night and the Yacht Club Dinner. From here they waved goodbye to friends departing on leave or retirement, seen and envied aboard the decks of Europe-bound liners. When the Aden harbour-master retired, a stream of signal flags broke out on the Port Office mast, ostensibly bidding him 'God speed', but an ex-R.N.V.R. man among the farewell party at the club bar, asked to decipher the message, peered ginnily at the distant mast and pronounced that the message to the departing officer read: 'What have you done with the keys of the safe?' Here the shiny magazines recalled, in the pages of the *Field* and *Country Life* and *Illustrated London News*, an England that half of them did not really know, for which there was a nostalgia, as unreal as the magazine portrait, in terms of country pubs and London theatres, coupled with a distrust of the English climate and a wariness about British income tax.

The British played games: tennis, squash, polo, cricket (on matting); swimming clubs were popular, and sailing. They attended open-air cinemas and played at amateur dramatics and performed Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and ran art exhibitions. Their wives took office jobs and did charity work, running clinics for soldiers' families or raffles for the Aden Blind Society, or to send a team to the Commonwealth Games or the Aden Boy Scouts to a jamboree. The men attended Masonic lodges and Rotary lunches and served on club committees and drank a good deal more whisky than in England.

The social rat-race was intense and name-dropping prevalent. 'I didn't see you at Blanks last night' (fifteen-love). 'No darling, we were dining at the Smiths' (fifteen-all, the Smiths being higher on the social scale than the Blanks). 'Ah yes, of course, we were there *last* week, just a *small* party; they told us they were having a great beano to work off a lot of outstanding invitations' (thirty-fifteen, a small dinner party scoring higher than a buffet-supper). 'I had a long talk with General Jim, such a sweetie' (thirty-all; it was the vulgar and would-be-smart fashion among service wives to speak familiarly of senior officers) 'and then went on to his place for mulligatawny and champers' (thirty-forty). 'I find him a great bore' (a useful rally but not point-scoring). 'I suppose we'll be seeing you this evening?' (A very cunning attack this, leaving the defendant vulnerable unless

she had a genuine trump left, such as a G.H. invitation, since she may not have known to which occasion her opponent referred. To admit that one had no invitation for some big occasion or, indeed, to admit that one had a free evening at all was to surrender game, set and match: a telephoned invitation had always to provoke the reply, 'Let me just look at my book, dear,' never anything so naïve as immediate acceptance.)

The wives were the most zealous players, although the men participated too: in many houses you would observe – oh, fearful vulgarity! – invitation cards displayed like hunting trophies for all to see, arrayed on sideboard or bookshelf, and indicated, in case the innocent visitor had failed to show awareness of them, by a deprecating wave of the hand and a languid reference to what a bore it all was, so much social life, 'not had an evening to ourselves for weeks, I keep the cards out to remind me, otherwise I forget.' Not so different from Surrey or suburbia perhaps, but more naked, more exposed, under the remorseless Aden sun.

A feature of the expatriate community was that there were few old people, and few children other than infants; from the age of eight most European children departed to boarding schools. The community comprised for the most part men and women between the ages of twenty-five and fifty, the years when families are young. After fifty, most left Aden for retirement and, unlike more favoured tropical territories, there was no inducement to linger in Aden. There was no 'white settler' problem: the sole 'white settler', the only Englishman to own his house and land in Aden, was an amiable, music-loving golfer at Sheikh Othman, whose self-imposed exile was mitigated by frequent vacations in Europe. Men came to Aden when they had qualified in their profession, after training in some London 'head office' or with a university degree, so that there were few under twenty-three, except young soldiers.

By and large they looked more healthy than they would have done in England, partly from the suntan and partly from the lighter, younger-looking clothes. The men wore lightweight slacks or shorts – white, navy or khaki – and open-necked shirts. Neckties were worn by the more pretentious, and jackets of cotton or tussore during the cool months. The sun-helmet had vanished except in the anachronistic Government ceremonial uniform, and hats were not much worn

except at the Khormaksar races, where, in a tropical travesty of Newmarket, everyone became fearfully bogus and tweedy, and appeared with curly-brim country-style headgear or racy peaked caps, yellow weskits, hackin' jackets and shootin' sticks.

The women managed with a single wardrobe throughout the year. It was never cool enough truly to warrant changing into anything other than lightweight clothes, although a cardigan might be necessary at open-air cinemas during the three cool months. They wore prints and cottons, sleeveless, with wide-cut necklines; lightweight silk or linen suits were smart for evenings but were rarely seen, outnumbered by the endless range of so-called cocktail dresses of all shapes and fabrics and sizes. Long dresses were seldom worn, although in the early fifties they were usual at dinner-parties and dances: but the men still changed into tropical evening kit, with white jackets and coloured cummerbunds. Among the women, sandals were distressingly common, comfortable, cool and sensible, but, alas! terribly unsmart.

Their clothes, their heavy drinking, their afternoon siesta, all conformed to the relentless demands of that fifth strand to Aden's texture, the inescapable climate. I am a connoisseur of bad climates. I can compare Aden with India, from arid Frontier to sweating Madras; with dripping Sumatra, where I crept about the wet jungle being shot at by the Indonesians, or with the Sahara edge, where my wife and I trekked for more than a year on Lake Chad, living in grass huts, without electricity or other shield against the climate; with south Persia, where the thermometer reached 126 in the shade – we were under canvas and it was extremely uncomfortable; with the Scinde desert and the salt desert of Qum and the Libyan desert and the hot steppes of Mosul.

Of them all, Aden's climate is the worst; not in thermometer readings – it rarely rises above 100 – but in the six months' prolongation of the hot weather, there being little fall in the heat at night, and in the absence of rain, there being no regular rainfall, a ten-year average being less than three inches per year. The cool season, of perhaps three months, is not nearly cool enough to recharge vitality and health lowered during the six months of oppresive heat. A single light blanket suffices on even the coolest night, and from January to December one may greet the dawn from an open verandah without a

shiver, clad only in a waistcloth; 'cool weather' is a relative term. With the advent in the middle fifties of air-conditioning, life for the expatriates became more agreeable; at least one was assured of a night's sleep, and the memory fades of nights evilly hot when one lay sweating and sleepless under ineffectual fans, and, like St. Paul, 'wishing for the day'.

In summer, to add to the discomfort, there is dust and sand and the occasional sandstorm, the monsoon winds fretting and blustering without cooling. In the delightful *Sketches of Aden* by an anonymous 'Officer in the Queen's Army', published in 1848, the author devotes a deeply felt page to the climate: 'In the hot season the intense heat, the scorching, suffocating winds, the dust storms, form so disagreeable a variety, to say nothing of the consequent misery and discomfort which have to be endured, that men's minds sicken beneath their baneful influence, nay even life itself becomes well-nigh insupportable.'

To the disagreeable climate must be added the physical restrictions of the island: you cannot escape from it. Except for a few up-country officials, the residents of Aden were unable to visit the interior. A landrover was needed, there being few roads, and an escort, there being much insecurity, and a knowledge of Arabic, few in the hinterland speaking English, and someone to put you up, there being no hotels or rest houses – a whole range of difficulties which effectively restricted the expatriate community (and for that matter the Adenis as well) to the skirting of road and town which semi-circles the island. One might drive to Little Aden to see the oil refinery and the army cantonments – hardly the scenery for psychological relief. Or you might go to Sheikh Othman gardens to listen to the wind in the palms and the jabber of transistors. You might go even to Lahej – there is now tarmac all the way – where, apart from an occasional stone thrown at your car and shouts of 'Long live Nasser', you might enjoy the trees beyond the town. But relentlessly, as though secured by an extended coil-spring, you must turn back to Aden. To persons of sensitivity this circumscription induced a depressing claustrophobia.

To discount these disagreeable aspects of Aden would be dishonest. The bad climate is a fact and, contrary to popular belief, long residence did not accustom the foreigner to bear the hot seasons more phlegmatically: it was rather the common experience that hot

seasons 'got longer' each year. Captain Hunter observed in 1877 that 'Aden is not usually considered by medical men to be an unhealthy station but it is a well ascertained fact that *long residence impairs the faculties and undermines the constitution of Europeans*' (my italics). As I had fourteen Aden years, I feel entitled to claim the reader's indulgence for any little acerbities! As for the unfortunate Adenis, I have curbed always any tendency to be critical of them, since to pass one's entire life in this climate and these surroundings is to deserve of others the greatest tolerance and sympathy.

Other writers have been less tolerant. Apart from Kipling's bleak description, Aden has always had a 'bad Press', from Arab writers no less than others. Ibn Batuta, most famous of Arab travellers, described Aden as 'a large city without either seed, water or trees', while his near contemporary, Ibn Mujawwir, wrote that its climate was so bad that in the space of ten days it would turn wine into vinegar! In 1849 Hooker, the famous botanist, thought it 'the ugliest, blackest, most desolate, and most dislocated piece of land . . . that ever I set eyes on.' This fore-echoes the American magazine *Time* of 1963: 'With its stupefying temperatures and bleak terrain Aden is one of the world's most unattractive pieces of real estate.'

The utter lack of vegetation has been noticed by most writers: Hunter, whose 1877 account is official and objective, remarks that 'the bright green colour which forms so pleasing a feature of the vegetation of the temperate and tropical regions of the globe is quite unknown in Aden' and adds that of the ninety-four known species of flora, sixteen bear sharp thorns! This absence of greenery is, in prolonged residence, a great weariness to the spirit. Keith Falconer, founder of the medical mission at Sheikh Othman in 1885, despite missionary zeal had a clear enough eye when he wrote that 'there is probably no place on the surface of the habitable globe more utterly arid and dreary to the eye than Aden'.

Tourist literature, not a genre given to deprecatory writing, has decided that, with Aden, it is better to be honest than euphemistic. A P. & O. brochure says that 'the first sight of Aden . . . is uninviting, particularly at midday, when the hot sun, reflected from the yellow rock, gives the whole coast a parched and unwelcoming appearance', while the B.O.A.C. handbook warns its passengers to Aden that it is 'sun-scorched, barren, lapped by a sluggish and too-warm sea'.

The effect of the place on more sensitive souls is harsher. Ethel Mannin, the novelist, passing through in the late forties for her *Jungle Journey*, thought that Aden was surely never meant for human habitation, while the poet James Kirkup, ten years later, in *Tropic Temper*, thought it 'one of the most hellish holes on earth'.

James Morris, that perceptive and experienced Middle Easter, in *The Market of Seleukia*,* has a chapter on Aden, which he describes as occupying a situation of 'startling discomfort'. He continues:

> 'Aden strikes most newcomers as unmistakably the most repellent city in the Middle East. During more than a century of prosperous rule Britain has brought not one single beautiful thing to Aden, and it stands there on its bay blasted and despondent, as if life has become one long awful hangover. Its streets are cracked and rubbish-blown. Its buildings are drab, its shops slatternly. Its setting is infused with savage force, but there is little sense of majesty or power to the vast rambling installations which announce the faded presence of the British Raj. A hangdog, shabbily mercantile feeling permeates the geometrical streets of the colony, and only the great ships offshore, endlessly steaming in and out of the harbour, give it any sense of grace. . . . Aden has none of the piquancy or spice of an Arab city . . . its traditional purpose has been a grubby and graceless one: a coaling station. . . . There is no sense of aristocracy to Aden, no hints of gilded excess, no swaggering princelings, no imams of unspeakable sanctity. Its vices, you may feel, are squalid ones, tucked away in smutty back streets. . . . Melancholy swirls heavily around the crags of Aden. When they talk nowadays of the Empire on which the sun never sets, they are surely thinking *au fond* of Aden. It is drenched with the mystique of Empire. Its climate is atrocious, its manner garrisonic.'

It would be hard to better this thumb-nail sketch. Naturally, there are contrary opinions, notably in *The View from Steamer Point* by Sir Charles Johnston, recently High Commissioner.† For a corrective to Ibn Batuta, Hooker, Hunter, Falconer, Kirkup, Mannin, Morris and *Time* magazine, you should read Johnston, bearing in mind that Sir

*Faber, 1957 †Collins, 1964

Charles is a career diplomat and may have seen his view from Steamer Point through spectacles diplomatically rose-tinted.

Across the shallows of the eastern end of Aden harbour, where the isthmus joins the island to the mainland, a causeway leads to the north shore. It was built in 1954, when the oil refinery came to Little Aden, and the shallows on either side are fast silting up. In another few years building will be possible, and the bijou causeway road will be degraded to the same level of built-up squalor as other Aden streets. At present it passes ruler-straight and four miles long through limpid shallow lagoons, glaze-clear and perfectly mirroring the entrancing bird-life that paddles and puddles in them.

It was my fortune for some years to traverse each morning this agreeable road on my way to the Federal capital, and in bleak days of unending heat the early morning drive provided a brief moment of pleasure. One's back was turned on the domineering rock and the prospect was towards the open country of the interior, usually obscured in dust haze but briefly and remarkably clear for a few weeks in autumn, when the impressive contours of the mountains give a perspective and proportion to the otherwise formless landscape.

The stillness of the shallows, their exact repetition of the blue and gold of early morning, made a world of light and colour, and one drove as through a Turner landscape, all colour, a minimum of form. Half way, the low white buildings and red Malabar tiles of old salt works are echoed in the water, where fishermen cast circular nets for whitebait, and at high tide small tugs tow salt-barges under the causeway bridge.

But it is the birds which give to the road its distinction, for without leaving your motor-car you may see as many varieties of wader as anywhere in the world. Stilts and dunlin and sanderlings, pelicans and flamingoes, curlew, godwit, avocet and spoonbill. Heraldic ospreys, white-breasted, perch on the telephone poles, and Brahmini kites soar endlessly in the heavy air; above the kites circle the vultures, mostly the white and brown Egyptians but occasionally the larger griffon vultures, drifting on ten-foot wingspan at two thousand feet. Oystercatchers, dapper in black and white, poke about in the grey mud; flocks of reef herons, smoke-blue and white, as well as little herons hunched grumpily at the water's edge, and tall grey ones, like

the British heron, stalking delicately after shrimps. There are gulls too, and terns and, in winter, wild duck – golden-eye and shoveller, with some dubiously identified pochard and some suspect near-mallard.

The pelicans are fun, clumsy and huge on the water, powerful in flight; frequently they fly low in line ahead, wave-hopping, with all the power and purpose of a cruiser squadron. The flamingoes, those Alice-in-Wonderland birds, are all legs and neck; oddly, when the bird is in flight, the heavy curved bill at the end of the extended neck reminds me of the neck and scroll of a violin, so that an airborne flock looks like a flight of violins – an agreeable fancy – pale pink and, under the wings, unbelievably crimson.

I claimed at the outset of this book that it was a painter's view of South Arabia, but find that I have made no direct reference to painting or my practice of that art. It is appropriate therefore to mention at this point that there is a mural depicting the prospect from the causeway, with the flamingoes, which I painted for the foyer of the Shell Oil Company headquarters at Maalla. It was the biggest commission I have yet received: indeed, the only one I have ever accepted, since I prefer to paint to my own impulses rather than to fulfil commissions.

From the causeway the road turns across bleary suburban desert, passing the shanty-village of Hiswa. The people of Hiswa, so avers a friend, should greet each new day not only with the prescribed genuflections towards Mecca but should add a postcript seeking divine favour on the name of the writer. This custom – if it doesn't exist it should be instituted – derives from the time when an oil company was building a road to Little Aden for the new refinery, and was obliged to carve a swathe through the Hiswa palms. These provide a large nut-like fruit, from which a potent and disgusting toddy is made, and their loss had to be made good. The difficulty was to reconcile the disparity between the value put upon them by the villagers and that assessed by Government as fair compensation. The matter dragged on for some years, with the Secretariat file getting fatter but no nearer decision. Finally it drifted so far to the bottom of the hierarchy that it came to me, and I, clothed in a little brief authority, made a Solomon-like award half way between the lowest and the highest estimates. Government was very pleased with me for disposing of a

troublesome matter, but it was nothing compared to the delight of the villagers who had not seriously entertained hopes of any compensation at all!

Past Hiswa, under its nepenthean palms, one reaches the brand new capital of the Federation of South Arabia, Al Ittihad, which name means both 'the Federation' and 'the Unity', deriving from the root *wahid*, which any old Eighth Army man will tell you means 'one'. This surprising confection, starkly rising from the sand, is a creation of the sixties, building having begun in 1959. As yet there are no more than a dozen or two buildings: a secretariat, two-storeyed, with a centre-piece of high plain arches; half a dozen houses for Ministers, each surrounded by a six-foot wall to keep out prying eyes; the offices of the British High Commission, a secondary school, and a demure Hollywood-style mosque. Terrorism in 1967 has all but emptied its colonnaded offices, and its post-independence fate remains a matter for conjecture.

From Al Ittihad the road sweeps for eight miles through desert to Little Aden. On my first evening in Aden, in 1952, from the high verandah of Bill Goode's house at Steamer Point (he was Chief Secretary and went on to a distinguished career as Governor of Singapore), he pointed across the darkening harbour to an outcrop of spiky and picturesque peaks. 'I see from your record,' he said, 'that you served in Persia during the war. Did you see anything of the oil refinery at Abadan?' I replied that I knew it well: in 1945, when adjutant of a battalion of Afridis, I had guarded the length and breadth of that oily sandbank. 'Then tell me,' he continued, a twinkle in his eye, indicating the distant mountains, 'if we had a refinery over there, d'you think the smell would reach us over here?'

In this light-hearted fashion I learned of the refinery project, in 1952 still only a plan. Little Aden was then a desert peninsula, inhabited by a few fishermen in miserable huts, and accessible only by the roughest of tracks. Belhaven used to sail there in his Arab boat to get away from the detested headquarters atmosphere of Aden. It is a stark and rocky peninsula, volcanic like Aden, with its peaks sculpted into fantasies, pinnacles and towers and gothic mouldings, red and ochre and hot greys, rising suddenly from snow-smooth slopes of yellow sand and surrounded by bays of turquoise and indigo and jade. I did not see it until after work on the refinery had begun in 1953,

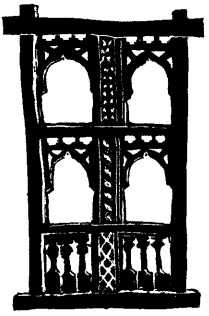
when, with a party of sheikhs and amirs and sultans, we bumped out to the site where several thousand tribesmen had been persuaded to abandon their lawless and improvident ways to take up labouring. (The experiment was only partly successful: few continued after construction was finished, and the labour force later comprised more Yemenis and Somalis than tribesmen.)

Before the coming of the refinery the peninsula must have been truly lovely, in a stark tranquillity, a desert silence. Even later, when the refinery occupied the east side, the south and west was splendidly empty and one could reach untouched coves to swim and picnic. But now even the farther beaches are peopled. The British Army built a huge cantonment, at unprovocative distance from the attention of the Aden mob, and a place of beauty has been destroyed.

One approaches Little Aden by a humped bridge over an inlet of the sea, where are drawn up the canoes and *sambuks* of the fishermen. On the left is the oil port, with regiments of pipelines marching to the moored tankers. There is a police station, a school, an open-air cinema and a cluster of shops. On the right, bleak streets of workers' quarters, on the left prim avenues for executives with nostalgic English names – Devonshire Street, Wiltshire Avenue and so on – grotesquely unrecognizable in the accompanying Arabic script. Next is the refinery, a power station and cracking towers and a tall chimney from which day and night flares a pillar of fire. Local myth has been busy with this impressive symbol: when the flare goes out, so goes the story, the British will leave Aden. Well, the British have departed but the refinery yet thrives.

Little Aden was ever a place renowned for myth and ghosts. The people, of mixed and humble origin, traced their several ancestors to Dis, near Mukalla, and to the Yemen, and possibly to India, whence derives the name of one of their clans, the Ahl Hinaid. They led a remote and isolated existence. Islam seems to have been but thinly absorbed, and the peninsula was crowded with djinns, lady djinns, devils and she-devils, witches and magic. Stones and mountains were sacred and spirits had to be propitiated with honey and milk and fish-oil, poured in libation at appointed times. Regrettably, their ghost stories are long, boring and imprecise: one concerns a holy man, so holy that he accomplished the journey from Little Aden to Basra in a canoe in three hours! Then there was an engaging lady spirit – I

failed to establish whether she was a *djinnah*, *shaitanah* or *sharifah* – who carried her breasts slung one over each shoulder until . . but then the story peters out. Many tales are set in an ancient time when the peninsula was green and forested, and herds of gazelle moved over rich pastures, the memory of a golden age. You may yet find simple altars or shrines in Little Aden, revealed by a fluttering rag on a stick above some otherwise unremarkable boulder, or a smear where oil has been poured out in libation. But these relics of a primitive animism are doomed to vanish. Islam and the oil refinery will erase them and doubtless will then struggle between themselves for dominance.



A Hadhrami window

CHAPTER XIV

PERIM

From the crushed coral the light struck fiercely white. 'This,' said Mr. Shubaili, improbably indicating a shimmering expanse of the stuff, 'was the croquet lawn. And that' – he waved a brown hand at a roofless shell – 'was the club.'

We were on Perim, the tiny rock-bound island at the bottom-end of the Red Sea where the ships of the world are bottle-necked into the Straits of the Bab el Mandeb, the Gate of Tears. What traveller does not know Perim? Oil men for Basra, merchants for Bombay, bankers for Rangoon and Singapore, sheep-kings heading home for Sydney, they all know Perim. Looking at it over the rail of a liner, a long, cold glass of beer in one hand, you will wonder what it's like on that desolate dun-coloured rock, and what people do there, and why they go there. You'll pick out buildings and a lighthouse – and then you'll be past it and forget it. Homeward bound you'll see it again – it's a sort of Marble Arch of the Red Sea, a point everyone knows but no one stops at. I had the luck to visit it once.

I had come from Aden, eighty miles north-east – a long eighty miles

as far as the coaster *Armor* was concerned: eighteen hours, with the wind behind us and the engine straining so that every one of the ship's sixty feet shuddered with the effort. We had sailed at four on a hot November afternoon from the coaster-quay up at the Maalla end of Aden harbour. Grubbily we nosed through the dhows – stinking goat-carriers from Berbera, long-nosed Kuweitis bound for Zanzibar, a high carved galleon-stern from Muscat, brightly painted Adenis with Koranic inscriptions in white arabesque; past comic coasters – like ourselves – from Massowa and Mogadishu, Assab, Hodeida and Mokha, and all the other hot little ports of the Red Sea. The afternoon light slanted across the bay, lighting Aden's red rock-wall as we went through the liner anchorage up at Steamer Point, towards the lunar peaks of Little Aden.

For'ard, in the tiny well-deck, resting on a foundation of drums of crude oil, sprawled the relief detachment of Aden Armed Police, bedding-rolls untied and spread over the drums, splashed with the colour of their scarlet turbans. They wore khaki, with silver buttons and dark-blue puttees, and on parade in Aden were exceedingly smart. Once aboard ship, however, like servicemen of any nationality, they had rapidly assumed an air of unbuttoned ease. One sucked at a hookah; a second tuned the radio to the gutteral Arabic of Cairo; a third devoutly spread a prayer-mat and stood, uncomfortable among the oil-drums and unsteady against the movement of the little ship, facing Mecca – approximately – to go through the ritual of his evening prayers. Above them was hoisted a yard, and from it unfurled a square and dirty sail, Viking style; as we plunged into the red-gold path of the sun, it gave the ship an antique air.

Sunrise, and an Orient liner ignored our insignificance in the waste of waters – hardly surprising, since the little ship spent most of its time lurching through valleys of water out of which its masthead scarcely protruded. On the starboard beam, desert hills climbed up to the distant Yemen, underlined at first with misty haze, grey-blue as the sun climbed: this was the bleak Subeihi country of the Aden Protectorate. In the hollows of the waves the low morning sun threw deep prussian-blue shadows – how intimate with the sea one is in a little ship!

With the sun, the wind freshened and we rolled disastrously. On the cabin table tomatoes and onions trundled from end to end,

drumming a tattoo; over the bows waves broke in high clouds of spray, drenching the night-huddled and blanket-shrouded policemen. A Somali youth, with a line over the stern, hauled in a fine three-foot kingfish, turquoise and jade and irridescent. Twenty minutes later I breakfasted on a cutlet from it, fried in dubious batter.

We approached Perim from the eastern side; it is smooth-topped, like a Sussex down, but utterly barren – not a tree, not a bush, not a blade of grass. In the morning light it glowered amber and purple black, the seas breaking white around the low cliffs. On the highest point stood a lighthouse, looking across the strait to the distant blue hills of Africa. In the other direction desert mountains came down to the Yemen shore by way of ochre beaches to a peacock sea.

Perim is a ghost island. Under the blazing sun and the unceasing sea-wind, surrounded by three miles of volcanic rubble, stands a whole colony of deserted buildings – roofless, windowless, silent. The shadows of empty archways circle endlessly across bare exposed walls, while the wind erodes remorselessly the crumbling coral plaster. There are ghost villas and ghost offices, ghost bungalows, and improbably, a ghostly croquet-ground. They stand back from the jetty where it juts into the sound, and climb echelonned up the low hills around the anchorage. The Arabs have taken over one or two of the buildings, but for the most part they are as empty and quiet as the ruins of Babylon.

Clearly, the archaeologists of A.D. 4000 will pronounce this was a foreign community which dwelt here, and they may speculate on the purpose that could have brought it to this infertile and barren rock. They may tentatively assess a wealthy master-race, possibly slave-owning, observing the numerous and obvious servants' quarters which attend on each of the larger ruins. They would be wrong, of course: the truth is that the community, while foreign, was waited upon not by slaves but in the lavish style of nineteenth-century British India. The purpose was the refuelling of ships. With coal. Of all the ghosts of Perim, perhaps the clearest is that of a ghostly collier, vintage 1900, with grubby awnings and a tall thin funnel, discharging coal by coolie into lighters.

The island flourished from the eighties until the middle of the 1930s as a coaling and cable station. It must have had a population of perhaps thirty Europeans, several hundred Indian or Arab coolies,

and the tiny community of native Perimites. You can see where – and how – they lived, in the long hot days before electricity. There are holes high up in the walls where the punkah-cords passed outside to the punkah-wallah, squatting and dozing on the verandah.

There are bigger ruins at the hilltop, where the manager of the telegraph company lived, evidently in some style – seven bedrooms, and servants' quarters big enough to house a platoon: his bearer, bearer's assistant, cook, cook's assistant, dhobi, water-carrier, sweeper, table-steward, syce, stable-boy, ayah for the children, memsahib's ayah-maidservant – the whole hierarchy of British Indian servantdom. Lesser officials lived farther down the hillside, in smaller but still generous bungalows. Seniority clearly dictated the height above sea level at which one was accommodated, for down by the jetty are smallish bachelor quarters, intended for newly arrived company cadets.

The bottom of the hill had its advantages: it was near the club, one of the larger ruins, two-storeyed, surrounded by a deep, arched verandah and approached by a shallow flight of steps. The cement cricket-pitch is just across the way, and it requires little effort of imagination to people the verandah with sunburnt young men, sprawled comfortably in cane armchairs (with a loophole built into one arm of the chair to accommodate a glass of gin-sling), cricketly dressed in whites and club ties (the Perim Peregrines?). The telegraph company would have played against the coaling company, and they would have combined against the teams of visiting warships. At one stage they even managed to hold a race meeting on the island, and there is a yellowing photograph of the event, the ladies in long skirts, with topees and parasols.

But now it is all quiet. There are no Europeans, only the tiny community of Perim Arabs; and the ruins set about the blue sound might be those of Nineveh, so distant and irrevocable are the years.

The cemetery at Perim is yet more poignantly evocative. It lies at the head of the sound, above a white coral beach under the purple-volcanic hills. Within a crumbled wall are more than a hundred Christian graves, some plainly under a mound of crushed coral, others lying in the full panoply of Victorian mourning, imported headstones, broken columns entwined in marble ivy, polished red sandstone inset with gothic lettering, with angels and mariner's anchors, regi-

mental crests, and scrolls engraved 'Mizpah'. Many are child graves: it must have been a precarious business, child bearing in these parts in those far-off days. Here in this desert island a little drift of foreigners came to shore: Dutch skippers, Greek traders, Germans, a Scots engineer, a ship's master from Ilfracombe in Devon. It must be one of the quietest graveyards in the world. It is not maintained, but no great harm can come to it now. Some of the headstones have been defaced, especially those bearing the insignia of a cross, but there is nothing now to damage or destroy except the slow erosion of time.

I looked for signs of the very first British occupation, but could trace none, and no one had even heard of it. I had been fortunate enough to unearth, in the Aden Secretariat, fading manuscripts in sepia italic script recording this forgotten incident, this footnote to the Napoleonic Wars.

It was in November 1798 that the Secret Committee of the Honourable East India Company, worried by Bonaparte's landing in Egypt (he was not yet Napoleon) and 'under apprehension for the safety of our Indian possessions', thought it worthwhile to occupy Perim against a thrust down the Red Sea, although they admitted to the governor at Bombay that 'the designs of the French have been considerably impeded by the glorious victory of Admiral Nelson over the French Fleet near Alexandria' – known to history as the Battle of the Nile.

So far, so good; but their intelligence was faulty. They had it on report that Perim commanded the sole navigable part of the Straits of the Bab el Mandeb, and that shipping was compelled by winds, shoals and tides to sail within gun-range of it. This was not the case, and in his first report from the island, the detachment commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Murray, reported, politely but acidly, that 'no Batteries erected on the island can command the entrance to the Red Sea'.

It was the water shortage that completely bedevilled their brief stay on the island; for they found no water of any kind, and were dependent from the outset on supplies from the mainland, carried by the ships of Rear-Admiral Blankett's squadron. He suggested, when the garrison had become aware of the problem, that the European soldiers of the detachment be re-embarked until they could be adequately

supplied ashore, and warned Murray that the squadron could not remain indefinitely at Perim or be responsible for watering the garrison. His ships had other duties, and in any case the monsoon, which was imminent, would compel them to abandon their station at Perim. Nor was he at all happy about the soldiers' utter dependence for supplies on the goodwill of the Mokha Government, a goodwill vulnerable to 'fear, jealousy, caprice or scarcity'.

Murray shared the admiral's doubts on the strength of their position, owing to 'the success of General Buonaparte and the doubtful conduct of the Sherreef of Mokha', but pointed out that if he were to re-embark the British troops of his detachment, it would be dangerously under strength when the squadron left the island. Nor did he understand what difference it would make to the situation whether the men watered ashore or afloat; the water all had to be brought from the mainland.

The stilted formality of the language, the inter-service rivalry, are curiously poignant today – one can visualize the admiral in blue, pacing his cabin, while a sweating writer takes down his irritable phrases, and across the water of the sound, the colonel in red, under the canvas of his tent in the sweltering heat, replying with equal formality and asperity.

Bombay entered the water-correspondence, expressing its 'serious regret and disappointment, after the confident, contrary relation delivered by the Arab merchant . . as to the well close to the harbour . . . we must suppose that the Arab in question has either practised an imposition which we cannot divine how he had any interest in, or that the well may have subsequently been filled up.' Clearly the Bombay Secretariat was not going to admit without reluctance that it had dispatched a force to a waterless and indefensible island.

By 9th June 1799, Murray was reporting again that his several measures to ensure a water supply had all proved of limited value, and that, with the oncoming monsoon, unless he could ensure a six months' supply, he would have to evacuate the island. The source from the adjacent mainland had dried up. 'We had previously engaged a few fishermen on the Bab el Mandel [*sic*] side to bring us water and fresh provisions, which they continued to do at an exorbitant price till within these few days, when partly from fear of the northerly winds, and partly from having made what to them is a

fortune, they have totally abandoned the Cape, and returned to their own habitations.'

The supply from Mokha was equally precarious. The consul there, Captain Wilson, hired a dhow to bring them water, but 'she could only obtain a small quantity, and could not hoist in large casks, and no great benefit was obtained by this means.' The Abyssinian side produced nothing at all, and even the casks supplied by the navy were small and in bad condition. His own casks were 'in a very bad state and daily got worse, from being sent so often backwards and forwards'. Digging for water on Perim itself continued 'without a shadow of success – wherever we dig, we find the soil perfectly salt and at a small depth a coral rock. There is hardly a living insect on the island, not a bird to be seen, nor is there a plant or shrub.' The detachment was rationed to five pints a day for each man.

There were money problems, too. Consul Wilson advised that the 'Mohammedan merchants refused to advance against Government Bills – when our cash fails us we must instantly depart, as not one drop of water is to be had or a sheep to be purchased till the money is actually counted. To conserve water, Murray reduced his force, sending a number of the Bombay Marine back to India, with regret since he was short of men who bore arms, but they were married and 'by this means I have got quit of their wives and children'.

Tempers frayed – understandably – during August on five pints of water a day. The colonel and the admiral had a further paper-war about water-casks. 'The supply of casks furnished by the Navy amounts to upwards of two hundred. I must take the liberty of observing that although perhaps in staves that number may have been received, that from the badness of the staves and hoops and likewise from the smallness of the size, little more than half that number have been of any other service than of repairing the remainder.'

'In regard to casks,' replied the admiral stuffily, 'it was impossible to have given them in any other way . . . if they were not all good nor all Butts or Puncheon Staves, I can only say that they were what we had for our own service and, as such, were not sent for the service of the Island'. Tartly he concluded: 'I should be happy at all times if the small assistance in my power to give was such as would be fully satisfactory.'

But the water problem remained unsolved; the blue waters of the

sound were whipped by the monsoon, and Murray departed with his little band for Aden and India, leaving Perim to its former silence. It was a curious episode, leaving no mark on Perim's volcanic boulders.

Reluctantly I abandoned my day-dreaming among the ruins and set to my chores: cheered up the Indian lighthouse-keeper, distant three stony miles from the community centred on the jetty – still called 'Company side' to distinguish it from the village. He had a wife in Aden and wanted leave. The police detachment turned out with a great shouting of orders and fell in for inspection – and very smart they were too. Beside their billet was a solitary grave, that of a Lieutenant Lawrence of the 1st Yemen Infantry, of whom, alas! it must be recorded that he was murdered by his own men in the early 1920s. Next, the dispensary, then the school, where I responded with what I hope was a proper school-inspector dignity to the chorused salutation of forty solemn little brown children. The cheerfulness of the teachers and other officials on this lonely island, far away from the bright lights of the towns, was praiseworthy indeed and inspiring.

At the sea-water distillation plant, housed in a vast hangar-like shed of corrugated iron, I witnessed in action an assembly of machinery worthy of Emett himself – massive tanks, copper tubing, brass casings, spindles, governors, shanks, sprockets, and unexpected puffs of vapour issuing from unauthorised orifices. And like the machinery of the well-known ballad, the whole jolly issue was driven by steam.

In, on and among this infernal machine clambered the four greasers who served it, dungareed, appropriately oily, professionally equipped, each one, as though it were Birmingham, with a wodge of cotton-waste. There was a host of complaints here; worn bearings, corroded piping, letters to Aden unanswered, spares going astray. I listened uncomprehendingly, but I trust sympathetically, to this welter of technical data fired at me in Arabic – the more difficult to understand since so many technical words are English ones, madly corrupted and mispronounced, and even endowed with Arabic plurals.

Next, to the post office, which took up one-half of Mr. Shubaili's table (the other half supported a pink enamel teapot). Mail is received and dispatched only on the occasion of the visit of someone from

Aden, such as myself, which may take place once a month, or perhaps once in two months. There was the usual crop of letters from philatelists requesting Perim postage stamps (there aren't any – the Aden issue is used), or asking for the impress of the Perim postmark. We could oblige with the latter, and Mr. Shubaili generously allowed me to stamp them all. To be sure, we had a certain amount of trouble with the stamp: the circular surround bearing the legend 'Perim Post Office' came out clear and sharp, but the date and time part of it, which should have formed the centre of the imprint, had fallen out, so that we had to pick up the tiny numerals in our fingers, inkily wetting them on the purple pad, and laboriously print them, one by one.

Tucked away on an arm of the sound lies the island's sole village – Maiun, or Mayoon. The huts are sun-grey driftwood, the planking and the pitched roofs giving it a curious un-Arab atmosphere, almost that of a cow-town in the Wild West. They line the white beach where slim sambuks are drawn up, the graceful local fishing craft, and nets hang drying in the sun. The children crowded round, and I escaped into the village shop to buy handfuls of toffees for them, a sort of danegeld. I might have known better: far from dispersing the children, the news spread like wildfire, and their number doubled. I could scarce credit that so small a village could produce so many cheerful children. Poor Mr. Shubaili did his best to shoo them away, without result, and we took refuge in the hut of the *qadhi*, the local judge.

The hut was, like the others, of driftwood, with daylight showing through the interstices of the planking, and a floor of beaten earth. It was furnished with one or two chests, a chair and a string cot, on which reclined the *qadhi*'s father, who had preceded his son in that office. He was blind, but as he drew at the long tube of his hubble-bubble he showed in his face a remarkable serenity, an attribute confirmed by his subsequent conversation. Unlike most of the Perim people, he had travelled widely in his youth as a seaman, and we spoke of Suez and Marseilles and even Cardiff. He was a remarkably philosophical and contented old man. He expressed gratitude to Government (unheard of in most parts of Arabia or, indeed, elsewhere) which had paid his salary as *qadhi* for so many years, and which now paid it to his son. But – and in this he ran more true to

the usual pattern – the cost of living had risen, and could Government not increase the salary? Over orange squash and a dab of rosewater for my hand – a local courtesy – I promised to look into the salary question, and departed, amid a flurry of mutual compliments, marvelling at such contentment in so frugal an existence.

Dusk was now approaching, and we headed for the resthouse where I was to spend the night. Up from Maiun, around the bays and inlets of the sound, past the crumbling cemetery, silent in the Red Sea dusk as it had been silent for so many years, past 1915 gun-pits of artillery (against the Turks in the Yemen) and shallow bomb-craters of 1940, when the Italians had presumed, during their briefly aggressive phase, to bomb the island; past Company-side's ruins and the collapsing jetty and the deserted coral croquet-ground to where, on the ultimate point of land, loomed the resthouse.

It was the epitome, the apotheosis, of the spirit of Perim. No dungeoned castle, no cliff-girt Highland ruin, no Rhineland *schloss* was ever so haunted as this black stone bungalow under the searing brightness of the Arabian sun. Single-storeyed, four-square, it stood on the remotest point of the island, between the tranquil waters of the sound and the racing current of the gulf. A wall surrounded it, of black lava boulders and white coral, within which two wiry tamarisks were all that remained of what had evidently been a gallant attempt at a garden. Immaculate plant-bed copings of stone, bordering crushed-coral pathways, looped ingeniously about the building, and it was easy to see the ghostly figure of some long-dead memsahib, long-skirted, parasolled, perhaps even gloved, directing the sweating labours of a brown and uncomprehending garden-boy. It must have been a heart-breaking business, gardening on Perim.

The flat roof was crenellated, and, hoisted in honour of my visit, a Union Jack cracked briskly in the high wind, the halliard tap-tap-tapping against the mast. In the old days the house had been that of the manager of the coaling company, who would have shared the position of the island's top man with the manager of the telegraph company. I wondered how the question of precedence was resolved – they were fearfully fussy about such things in the old days. Would their rival launches have raced bow-to-bow to be first alongside a visiting warship?

Although Perim's great days were before 1914, it continued as a

coaling station right up until the middle thirties, and the resthouse dated more truly in its idiosyncrasies to the twenties than to earlier years. That is, to the twenties as modified for the tropics: it was pure Somerset Maugham. The furniture, looking lost in the high, spacious and uncurtained rooms, was of light cane: armchairs, settees, peg-tables, supplemented by more solid pieces of Edwardian vintage, wildly incongruous here – a knobbly hat-rack, a washstand topped with brown and whorly marble, complete with rose-pink china pitcher, basin and soap-dish.

The watchman set down my bags and left me to unpack. I hung my hat (it should have been a sola topee) on the knobbly hat-rack, laid out my shaving-kit on the marble washstand, my papers on a fretted and finialled corner-cupboard. My clothes went into a chest of drawers with large white china handles; the newspaper lining the drawers, yellow with age, was *The Times* of 1926. It was really all too perfect, like a step backward in time. Down to the last detail it was correct, for under the bed was the indispensable Article. Of china. Willow pattern.

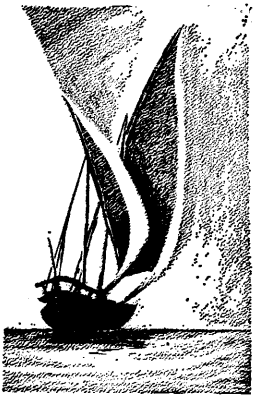
After supper I dismissed the cook, and watched him slope off down the white coral pathway back to the village, so that I was alone in the isolated and empty building. There was a near-full moon: across the racing wave-caps of the gulf the blue ranges of Eritrea set back one behind the other into Africa. With a pressure-lamp I wandered through the echoing and empty rooms, the shadows sliding and retreating and rounding on me, the night loud with wind and waves and the slapping of the ropes on the flagstaff. From the high ceiling of each room hung a long flex, terminating in a bulb of antique cut, with long zigzag filaments; there should have been beaded shades, of course, and a gramophone: one could almost hear the manager's wife, lately returned from leave in England, gushing about the latest records she'd brought back with her – 'No, no, Nanette' it would have been perhaps. There would have been cushions in orange satin, and pierrot dolls, and a cocktail-shaker beside a six-month-old copy of the *Tatler*. Maugham would have relished, I feel sure, the tale of the subaltern of a detachment on Perim who, bored with his charge, prevailed upon the skipper of a passing ship to take him to England and back for an unauthorized leave, before his relief was due. All might have been well had the

enterprising but foolhardy youth not ventured into the colonel-haunted purlieus of St. James's, where he encountered face to face, with no possibility of escape, the colonel from Aden who had dispatched him to Perim three weeks before. His fate is not recorded.

I returned for a nightcap to the trellised south verandah, put my feet on the rail and gazed across the wind-whipped gulf. A great white P. & O. liner sailed past on the tumbled water, the upper decks bright with coloured lights, and a whisper of dance music just audible across the narrow plain of sea between us. So near, and so distant from my solitude on this period-piece of an island!

I thought of all the quiet nights and days and years which had passed over this little backwater: of Colonel Murray and his sepoys in the eighteenth century; of the building of the lighthouse in the 1860s; the Edwardian heyday of croquet and formal calls; the gun detachment of young English Territorials in 1915; and the endless chant of the coolies coaling ship.

Among the hat-stands and the washstands and the curly cane furniture, the pressure lamp expired with a hiss and a glow and I slept with the uncaring ghosts of Perim.



An Aden dhow

EPILOGUE

At times it seemed that my years in Aden would never end – for Government service and I did not suit each other – and that before I could embark for the last time from Steamer Point I would have joined my several friends in the stony waste of Maalla cemetery. I should not have lacked company: dear Bob Mounde, murdered in Dhala; Teddy Nunn the witty lawyer, and Taki Stephanides the jolly Greek; Bert Goodman, murdered in Ahwar, and those others, buried elsewhere, whose lives were by South Arabia cut off untimely – Johnny the gentle Beduin; George, flamboyant, kindly, peacock-keeping George, killed by the same bomb that all but finished me; Jack Sale the policeman, and Dick Tring, commander of the Black Turbans. The environment is stark: between the oil tanks and the Admiralty yards and the back windows of flats where Somali nursemaids watched over pale British children, where bold black crows hopped among the dustbins and the kites wheeled endlessly over the red rock hillside. Often it seemed that only via the Maalla graveyard would I ever leave Aden.

But the end came at last: the civil service was 'arabized', and in 1966 I left South Arabia for ever. For the same reason as that given by the author of Ecclesiastes, as well as for deeply felt personal ones, I can say 'Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun'. It would be dishonest to pretend that my memories are other than tinted with sadness, coloured with regrets and underscored with bitterness. One cannot forget fourteen years of the Aden climate, fourteen years within the cribbed confines of this desolate peninsula and its forbidding hinterland.

But if there will be ineradicable memories of glaring, hot and sticky days, endless months of heat and discomfort, I shall not forget the relief which comes, sometimes with dramatic suddenness, in October, when one wakes to feel a new dryness in the air and from a Khormaksar verandah one may see clear across the desert, beyond Lahej, where newly revealed mountains have emerged in blue ridges from the hot-season haze, up towards Dhala and down the Subeihi coast. They are visible, alas, for only a week or two each year, which is regrettable since they give a perspective to the harbour which greatly enhances it and, by their suggestion of farther horizons, relieve the oppressive sense of confinement. It is at this season, had I a rich friend, a globe-trotter, that I would ask him to visit me in South Arabia. In the cooler weather, between November and January, I would show him this and other mountain landscapes: from Nobat Dukeim on the Dhala road, looking north-west across level desert to sudden and unpredictable peaks. There are Yafai ranges from Khanfar tor, best at early morning when the sun comes redly over the cotton fields and the smoke of Jaar town lies in level swathes. Anywhere on the Arqub Pass are dramatic views – down to the wide sea, as from an aircraft, to where Shuqra glimmers or, from a halting place half way to the summit, looking north to the Am Shaqqi Sultan's guarded hills. The great mountain wall of the *kaur* is everywhere impressive, rising sheer from the Dathina plain, the folds picked out in shadow at dawn and evening, the crest often cloud-wrapped; and, from the summit, after the hair-raising climb of the Thirra Pass, the reverse view over Lodar and Dathina, with the conical sugar-loaf peaks casting giant shadows across the plain. I would whisk my tourist over the Aulaqi badlands to Nejd al Masharah, where the Colorado-style buttes and mesas begin, magenta

and madder and ochre, and to Ataq to see the receding headlands of the *jol* run out to the wide desert; to the West Road, between Mukalla and the Hadhramaut, where there are some mountain spectaculars, and the first view of the Wadi Duan, cleft from the sunset *jol* deep in shadow, dark with palms ; to the canyons and groves of Wahidi Azzan. These are my favoured lanscapes.

Or Aden itself. The old Rock is impressive whichever way you approach it, coming down the gulf from Bombay or Basra, Mombasa or Melbourne, or around the corner from Perim and the Red Sea. I would take my tourist to the north shore of the harbour between Hiswa and Little Aden, whence the island is seen across black-blue sea and, especially in late afternoon, glows red and amber. I would take him to see the dhows at Maalla and hope to catch one as, at the harbour entrance, it hoists its great lateen sail into the monsoon wind; to Sheikh Othman to see the camels unloading, groaning and complaining, pampered by their drovers with folded wodges of greenstuff, and to look at the pleasing lines of earthenware jars in the potters' stalls.

I would hope that he would meet some of my old friends – the impetuous, warm-hearted Sultan Ahmed of Fadhli; the dignified and amiable Sultan Saleh bin Hussein, with his flat white turban and gold dagger; the up-and-coming young Arabs in the civil service, well mannered, touchy, impatient with the outworn political manoeuvres of sultans and British, eager for a new deal; the gentle, industrious Indian merchants, Patels and Bhicajees and Cowasjees, who, if they made good profits, did for Aden what no one else was able or prepared to do. I would also want him to meet some of the humble people who by their service and patience have made my long years here more endurable – Mohammed the cook, in my household for twelve years, who would tolerate no nursemaids to look after my infant sons but did it himself; Mohammed Yafai the driver, who has dug my landrover out of so many sand-drifts, and in his spare time dug my salty garden with more enthusiasm than I could ever muster; Ali, the Somali billiard marker at the club, who could contrive always to let me beat him; the cheerful harbour police who, with no authority except our long acquaintance, would take me in the police-launch to and from leave-bound ships, thereby depriving of a fare another

old friend, Sheikh Ali Ibrahim Noor, owner of the passenger launches.

I would arrange a lunch-party in the upper room of an old Arab house, to let him sample the spicy cooking, to see the great spread of dishes set out on the floor and to enjoy the novelty of eating with his right hand only. I would arrange for his visit to coincide with a sultanic occasion, say in Yafai or Beihan, to see the chanting ranks of tribesmen, circling in slow-paced procession, firing their rifles and shouting the praises of the event, with the horsemen and camelmen charging in the dust, showing off before the crowd, with women's shrill cries coming from crowded rooftops. I would whisk him up to the great valley of the Hadhramaut to see the houses, castles, stucco palaces, mosques and shrines and minarets among the date groves.

The antiquities? No: neither the Tanks at Aden nor the walls at Timna are sufficiently dramatic; my friend is a tourist and would compare with Ceylon and India, Lebanon and Greece. The uplands of Mukeiras and Dhala? No, again! My tourist would have seen Darjeeling or Naini Tal, Broumana or Delphi, and our local hill stations – when they are not closed on account of border wars – cannot compare. Folk dancing and costume? Alas, no! Here in the south are only the simplest tribal jigs, nothing to compare with the costumed Lebanon or exotic India or, in vitality, with uncostumed Africa, while the local dress is generally drab, lacking colour and interest, often dirty, unbuttoned and squalid.

Finally I would fly him slowly, by helicopter, down from the red dunes at the desert's edge, over the dead valleys of the Aulaqi, the empty lands of Atiqi, Rabizi, Ba Kazim and the rest, to see the fearful landscape in which the people endure their harsh lives under the merciless sun; over the clustered and suspicious villages of Hassani and Meisari and the rocky horns of Dathina, the lava-black wastes of Arqub, the tangled Yafai valleys around Al Qara and the dark ribbons of cotton fields in Wadi Yeramis; to Dhala and Jebel Jihaf where the amir keeps precarious balance between his turbulent clans; over the sands of the Subeihi coast and the blue sea, crinkled silver in the sun, tracked with the world's ships in this narrow seaway, flecked with the white sails of dhows.

These are worth remembering, as I shall remember them. There is much that I prefer to forget, but to my tourist I would not show it,

any more than I have shown it here. In South Arabia the blemishes are many, the charms few, and in this picture of a territory I, like a fashionable portraitist, have ignored the flaws and displayed the charms. For fourteen years of toil, the landscape remains sere enough.

INDEX

Abadan 176
Abdullah bin Ali 43
Abkari pier 15
Abu Hassan 79
Abubakr bin Abdullah Al Aidrus, Sayyid 22
Abyan 17, 22, 42, 76, 79-94
Abyssinia, *see* Ethiopia
acacias 38, 48
Acting Commissioner, Kamaran 62
Aden: airport 10, 114, 156; description and history 13-23, 163-178; location 14; mercantile history 14; commerce 14, 17, 22, 166; Protectorate 14, 33, 69-78, 116, 152-154, 156-157, 161; tourists 15; Secretariat 15, 56, 183; harbour 16, 167, 174; fortifications 17; British capture 18-20; prison 20; market 21; British military base 22, 154, 159, 164; political background 25-33; biblical references 25-27; early history 27-28; constitutional development 28-33; Port Trust 29; Settlement Board 29; Crown Colony 29; Executive Council 29-31; Legislative Council 29-31, 155; Members-in-Charge 30; elections 30-32, 154-155, 157; Governors and High Commissioners 31, 35, 92, 165-166; trade unions 31, 153-155, 160; Association 32; British Legion 35, 167; Little Aden, 37, 174-178, 193; Gulf of 69, 95; State of Emergency 117, 156, 158; accession to Federation 151-161; labour force 153, 155; importance of the port 153-154; police 156; Council of Ministers 157; constitution 157, 158; politicians 160; British in 163-170; church 163-164; social life 168-169; costume 169-170; climate 170-172; literary references 172-174; causeway 174-175; bird life 174-175; refinery 176-178; folklore 177-178
Advocate General 48
Aelius Gallus 27, 147
Afridis 176
agriculture 70
Ahl Fuleis 85
Ahl Hinaid 177

Ahmed bin Abdullah, Sultan 193
Ahmed bin Ali, Sheikh 14
Ahmed, Imam.. 113
Ahmed, Sherif 145
Ahwar 124, 132
Aidrus bin Mohsin 88
Aidrus mosque 22
Aidrus Suleimani 46
Aiyadin 140
Al Ittihad 176
Al Khabr 132
Al Kod 80
Al Qara 88-93, 194
Alawi Sheikh 116
Albuquerque 27, 28
Algeria 33
Ali Abdul Karim 42, 43, 78
Ali Hadi, Sheikh 129, 130
Ali ibn abi Talib 110
Ali Ibrahim Noor 194
Ali Said Pasha 36
Ali Salem bin Ali Abdo 31
Allenby 36
Am Saidi 129
Am Shaqqi Sultan 192
Am Surra 125
Amethyst Starling 40
Amin, Sheikh 103
Amir Haidera 51
Amir Naser 51
Amir Saleh of Beihan 113
Anglo-Turkish Boundary Commission 109, 111
Convention 110, 112
animals 125
antiquities 148, 194
Aqrabi 40
Arab awakening 32
Arab character 32, 47, 75

Arab society 72
Arabia Felix 148
Arabic 52, 55, 103, 106, 146
archaeology 148
architecture 99, 100, 102, 105
Armed Police 180, 186
Armistice (1918) 38
Armor 180
arms 114, 116
army, Federal, *see* Federal Regular Army
Arqub pass 121, 124, 125, 192, 194
Ashal, bin 131
Asmara 66
Asnag, Abdullah 31
Assalah 121, 122
Ataq 137, 140, 193
Atiqi 136, 194
Audhali 22, 28, 77, 111, 114, 124-129, 156
Augustus 147
Aulaqi .. 46, 47, 114, 129, 133, 135, 137, 138, 142, 158, 192
  Lower 124
  sayyids 43
  Sultanate 115
  Upper 77, 114
Ausan 148
Awadh, Sherif 145
Azraqi 51, 116

Ba Kazim 132, 139, 140, 194
Bab el Mandeb 69, 179, 183, 184
baboons 48
Badr, Imam 116-119
Baharoon, Sayyid Zain 33, 157
Bahrein 16, 22
Baillie, Major 19
Bana, Wadi 80, 85
bank-notes, design 16
Basendwah, Abdullah 31

Bashraheel, Ahmed .. 124, 128-130, 132, 139, 140, 146
Bayoomi, Hassan Ali 31, 33, 155, 157
Beduin 70, 95, 122, 124
beidan tree 40, 126
Beihda 129
Beihan 70, 113, 114, 124, 137-149, 156, 194
Bel Harith 138-141
Belhaven, Lord 48, 74, 85, 113, 134, 176
Berbera 17
Bhicajee 193
Bible, South Arabian references in 25-27
bin Ashal 131
'Bint es Sudan' 61
Bir Ali 27, 147
Bir Lake 122
birds 40, 104, 107, 174, 175
Birmingham 71
Blankett, Rear-Admiral 183
blood feuds 72
B.O.A.C. 172
Bombay 16, 19, 20, 23, 28, 29, 183, 184
  Bishop of 56
  Marine 185
Bonaparte 183, 184
Boundary Commission 56
British: presence in Aden 14; soldiers' name for Aden 14; Queen Victoria 14, 19; naval establishments 15; soldiers' families 16; British Agent, Western Aden Protectorate 18, 50, 127; capture of Aden 18-20, 28, 40; Political Resident 19, 57; share of commerce 22, 166; arrival in Aden 25; control of South Arabia 28-33; colonial record 28; Colonial Service 30, 160, 164, 165; First World War 32, 35-38, 64, 74, 111; British Legion 35, 167; High Commissioners and Governors 35, 92, 156, 157, 165-166; relations with Lahej 40-43; Royal Air Force 48, 53, 74, 75, 91, 94; justice 49; Political Officers 49, 50, 74, 103, 122, 127; relations with Dhala 50-51; Treaties 51, 69, 75, 78, 111, 112; British Museum, 55; cemetery at Dhala 56-57; Commissioners of Kamaran 64-65; control of

British (*continued*):
Kamaran 64-65; Protecting Power 69, 109; relations with Protectorate 73,78; British Resident and Adviser, Mukalla 75; development in Protectorate 75-76; in Abyan 86-87, 90, 92-94; relations with Yemen 109-119; creation of Dathina 129; policy and military base 151-161, 163-164; end of rule in South Arabia 160-161; church in Aden 163-164; social life 168-169; costume 169-170; in Little Aden 177; on Perim 181-190
broking 22
Buraimi 116
Bury, Wyman 26, 41
Busi Sheikh 94

Cairo 33, 43, 158
radio 114, 117, 118
Calcutta 18, 19
Caledonian Society 167
camel-spiders 125
camels 91, 95, 107, 121, 124, 140, 141
Campbell, Roy 144
Canal Zone 154
Canneh 27
carpets 143
Catha edulis 54
census 70
chameleons 125
Chief Commissioner 29
Chief Minister 31
chikore 46
Chinese, in Yemen 116
Christianity in South Arabia 27
Civil Service 32
climate 14, 70, 163, 170-172, 192
Club, Union 166-168
coal 181
coaling 74
cobras 125
Coca-Cola 46, 61, 82

coffee 2, 8, 17, 92
Colonial Office 29
Colonial Service 30, 160, 164, 165
commerce 14, 17, 22, 166
Congo 159
Constantius 27
cooking, Arab, *see* food
coral 17, 66, 179
Corkill, Norman 84
coronation, Queen Elizabeth II 89
costume 22, 39, 43, 52, 61, 82, 89, 102, 104, 131, 134, 138-139, 164, 169-170, 194
cotton 17, 73, 81, 84, 86, 87, 92, 124, 126
Council of Ministers 157
crab 67
Crater 17, 20-23
Crescent, the 15
croquet 179, 181, 188, 190
Crown Colony 29, 152
crucifixion 41
Cruizer 19
Cuckoo, Klaas's 40
customs, local 54, 61-63, 81
Cyprus 154

Dammani 114
Danakil 65
dancing 194
Dar al Amir 36
Dar Saad 43
date palms 38, 96, 99, 107, 143, 144
Dathina 124, 128-131, 139, 192, 194
Davey, Peter 50, 123
Davis, John 94
Deccan 71
decolonization 160
defence, British policy 159, 161
Delhi 29

Devon 183
Dhala .. 38, 49, 51-52, 77, 109, 111, 156, 192, 194
Amir of 45, 47, 51, 194
cemetery 56, 57
honey 52
Dhofar 17, 146, 147
dhows 16, 22, 123, 180, 194
Diredawa 117, 118
Dirjaj 91, 92
docks 22
dollars, Maria Theresa 144-145
Doria Dowlut 18, 19
dress, *see* costume
Dual Mandate 75
Duan, Wadi 97
Dublin Fusiliers 22, 25
duck 80, 84

East Africa 71,154
East India Company 19, 28
Eastern Aden Protectorate 152
Ecclesiastes 192
economy 71, 161
egrets 80
Egypt .. 18, 28, 33, 43, 90, 114-118, 148, 156, 158, 160
Egyptian Army 156
elections 30-32, 154-155, 157
Eliot, T. S. 38
Emergency, State of 117, 156, 158
emigration 71
Empty Quarter 70, 99, 146
Ethiopia 14, 17, 26, 27, 54, 66, 117
ethnology 71
Europeans 70
Executive Council 29-31

Fadhl bin Abdul Karim, Sultan 41, 42
Fadhl bin Ali, Sultan 41-43

Fadhli Hassan Aulaqi 135, 136
Fadhli .. 22, 77, 79, 80, 81, 85, 86, 93, 122, 124, 125, 129
Naib 122
Falconer, Keith 172, 173
Farouk, King 77
Farouzh 39, 40
Fatima 110
fauna 125
Fauna Preservation Society 146
Federal Constitution 154
Council 155
Guards 46, 47, 76, 146, 165
Regular Army 121, 137, 154, 158, 160
Federation 32, 76, 78, 112, 114, 117, 155, 157, 159, 160, 176
feuds, blood 72, 76
First World War 32, 35-38, 64, 74, 111
fishermen 123
fishing 70
flamingoes 175
floods 82
F.L.O.S.Y. 160
folklore 177-178
food, Arab 53, 106, 123, 135, 194
foxes 125
frankincense, *see* incense
Free Yemeni Movement 115
frontier, with Yemen 109, 111, 112, 114
Fuleis, Ahl 85

games 168
gazelles 63, 65, 125
Genesis, Book of 25, 26, 28
ghost island 181
ghosts 190
Goode, Sir William 176
Government Guards 154
Government House, Aden 31, 166
Government of India Act 29

Governor of Aden 31, 92, 165
Greece 148
greeting, ritual of 97
Guardafui, Cape 23
gum arabic 17
Gupta, Dr. Sen 92

Habil Hamra 48
Haddar, Emir 94, 139, 146
Hadhramaut 18, 26, 70, 99-102, 104-105, 107, 125, 132, 147, 193, 194
Hadhrami Sheikh 94
haditha 61
Haid, *see* Al Haid
Haid al Ma 113
Haidera Mansur 85, 91, 92
Haines, Captain 18, 19, 28
Halima 91
Hampshire Regiment 56
Hanashi 122, 124, 125
Hardaba, Wadi 48
Harib 113
Harir 49
Hartley, Brian 86
Hashemi 141
Hassan Khan 59, 62, 63, 66
Hassan, Wadi 80, 84, 91
Hassani 129, 139, 146
Haushabi 36, 40, 46, 51, 87
Hazarvameth (Hadhramaut) 26, 95-107, 193
Hedjuff 15
H.E.I.C. (East India Company) 19, 28
Hejaz 32
Hickinbotham, Sir Tom 42, 43
High Commissioner 35, 156, 157, 165-166
Himyaritic kingdom 113, 146, 147
Hinaid, Ahl 177
Hindus 22

Hiswa 175, 176, 193
Hodeida 116, 118
Hoeck, Dr. Eva 72
Holkat Bay 22, 23
Holy Quran 39, 61
Hooker, Sir Joseph 172, 174
hospitality 46, 47, 53, 106
houses, Arab 52, 60, 100, 105, 134
Hunter, Captain 22, 172, 173
Husn Khanfar 85, 93
Hussein bin Abdullah 122
Hussein, Sherif 141, 145-146
Husseini Gardens 40
Hyderabad 71, 79
hyenas 87, 125
hyrax 125

ibex 125
Ibn Batuta 172, 173
Ibn Mujawwir 172
Ibn Omar 27
Ibn Saud 111
'ilb trees 144
Illahi 131
Imam Ahmed 113-118
Imam of Sana (Yemen) 50, 110, 111, 113-118
Imam Yahya 111
incense 17, 61, 146, 147
independence 151
India 9, 18, 19, 29
Indian commerce 32
  community in Aden 21, 22, 29, 31
  influence on costume 39
  Navy 18-19
indigo 27, 76, 124, 131, 143
industries 71
Inge, Charles 18
Ingrams, Doreen 72, 75

Ingrams, Harold 74, 85, 86, 110
Iran, *see* Persia
Iraq 74, 159
irrigation 73
Isaiah 26
Islam 27, 70, 110, 177, 178
Ismail, Sayyid 41
Israel 21, 117, 158
Ittihad, *see* Al Ittihad

Jaabil, Naib 127, 128
Jaar 70, 192
jackals 125
Jacob, Colonel 37, 74, 111
Jauf 147
Jebel Jihaf 49, 50, 55, 117, 194
Jebel Ramd 131
Jebel Sugaimah 133
Jeddah 42, 115, 116, 118
Jeremiah 26
Jews, in Aden 21, 70, 157
  riots against 33
Job 26
Johnston, Sir Charles 173
Joktan 26
jol 95, 193
Jordan 77, 141, 148, 158
Joshi, V. K. 31-33
Journey of the Magi 38
Jungle Journey 173

Kamaran 59-67, 117
Karachi 17
Kathiri 73
  Army 103
  Sultan 101
kaur 128, 130, 192
Kazimi, *see* Ba Kazim

Kedar 26
Kersh 46
Keyes, Sidney 133
Khanfar 85, 192
Khartoum 77
Khaura 125
Khoreiba Pass 49
Khormaksar 37, 38, 192
kingfish 181
Kings, Book of 26
King's Own Shropshire Light Infantry 117
Kipling, Rudyard 13, 21, 172
Kirkup, James 173
Klaas's Cuckoo 40
Kod, Al, *see* Al Kod
Kohlan 146
Koran 39, 61
Kuwait 93

Laban Street, Aden 22
Labour Government 159
Lahej 17, 27, 28, 35-43, 51, 109, 151
Sultan of 18, 19, 28, 37, 40-43, 50
Lahmar 131
Lahore 33
Lake, Colonel 74, 122, 123
landrover 63, 124
Lebanon 32, 102, 160
Legislative Council 29, 32, 155
leopards 125
Levies, Aden Protectorate (later Federal Regular Army q.v.)
116, 154, 157
Little Aden 37, 174-178, 193
Lloyd George 28
Lodar 70, 124, 126, 128, 192
London conference 114
Lower Yafai, *see* Yafai
Luqman family 155

Maalla 15-17, 40, 193
cemetery 191
Macaulay, Rose 10
Maflahi Sheikh 94
Mahfidh 124, 131, 132
Mahra 22, 71
Main Pass 17, 20
Maiun 187, 188
Makhzan 84
Makkawi, Abdul Qawi 157
Manahil 70
Mannin, Ethel 173
Mansuri 132
Marble Arch 179
Maria Theresa dollars 144-145
Marib 27, 147
Marine, Indian 18, 19
Market of Seleukia, The 173
Marqashi (or Markashi) 125
Marshag, Ras 23
Masabi (or Masabein) 114, 145
Masharah, Nejd al 133, 137
Maugham, W. Somerset 166, 189
Mausatta, Nakeebs (or Naqeebs) 94
meals, Arab, *see* food
Mecca, Sherifs of 141
Meisari 129, 194
Members-in-Charge 30
Mesopotamia 36, 148
Meulen, van der 26, 74
Middle East 159
politics 32
mineral wealth 73
Ministry of the Interior 36
Mogadishu 23
Mohammed Ali Pasha 19
Mohammed bin Aidrus 89, 93
Mohammed Prophet 72, 104, 110

Mohsin Mohammed, of Dirjaj 91
Mokha 28, 180, 184, 185
coffee 17
Mombasa 16
Morris, James 173
mosques 14, 21, 22, 65, 101, 102, 107, 176, 194
Mudia 70, 129, 131
Mukalla 17, 22, 70, 95-97, 115, 193
Mukeiras 127, 128, 130
Muncherjee collection of antiquities 148
Murray, Lieutenant-Colonel 183-186, 190
Muscat 116, 146
Sultan of 69
Museina 137
Muslim religion, *see* Islam
myrrh 17

Najran (or Nejran) 115, 147
Nakeebs (or Naqeebs) of Mausatta 94
Nakhai 116, 125, 128
Napoleon Bonaparte 183, 184
Naser, Amir of Dhala 51
Nasser, President .. 33, 43, 114, 116-118, 157, 158, 160
National Liberation Front 160
Navy, Indian Marine 18-19
nazia 85
Nejd al Masharah 133, 137, 192
Nejd Marqad 113, 114
Nejran, *see* Najran
Nelson, Admiral Lord 183
Neqb al Hajjar 148
Nigeria 72, 99, 143
Nizam of Hyderabad 71, 79
Noah 21, 26
Nobat Dukeim 36, 37, 45, 192
nomads, *see* Beduin
Nuqub 140-142, 145

oil 73, 113, 154, 159, 161, 176-178
Oman 69
oryx 109, 146
Othman, Sheikh 28, 36-38, 51, 172, 193

P. & O. shipping company 172, 190
Palestine 36, 160
pelicans 175
People's Socialist Party 33, 154, 156, 157
Peri Pasha 28
Perim 69, 109, 113, 179-190
'Periplus of the Erythrean Sea' 27, 147
Permanent Secretaries 10, 48
Persia 9, 27, 176
Persian Gulf 23, 99, 161
  invasion 21
Pinafore, H.M.S. 129, 130
Pliny 27
police 60, 65, 156, 180, 186
Political Officers 49, 50, 74, 103, 122, 127
Political Resident 19, 47
politics, Aden 25-33, 151-161
  British 151-161
  Protectorate 69-78
  Yemeni 109-119
porcupine 125
Port Trust, Aden 29
Portuguese 27, 28, 60, 65
Protecting Power 69
Protectorate Rulers, *see* Rulers
Ptolemy 14, 27
Public Works Department 126
Punjab 40

Qahtan 26
Qana 27, 147
Qara, Al, *see* Al Qara
Qasim the Great 110

qat 49, 54, 55
Qataba 48, 156
Qataban 47, 146, 147
Qishn and Socotra, Sultan of 73
Quaiti 73, 114, 115, 152
'Queen's Arabs' 32
Queen's Birthday Parade 164-165
Quhra 111
Quran, Holy 39, 61
Quteibi 45, 46, 48, 49, 51, 156

Rabizi 114, 194
Radfan 47, 48, 156
Raidan 145
Ramlat es Sabatein 99
Ras Marshag 23
Rassassi 28, 111
rats 132
Red Sea 17, 19, 59, 64, 147, 152, 179, 180, 183, 188, 193
Reilly, Sir Bernard 74
religion, *see* Islam
Rome 27, 147
rosewater 61
Royal Air Force 48, 53, 74, 75, 91, 94
Rub al Khali 70
Rulers, Protectorate .. 114, 117, 118, 152, 158, 159, 160
Russia 116, 117

Sabeans 26
Sada 110
Said 133-134
Saidi, Abdullah 31, 33
Saiun 70, 101, 103, 106, 107
Saleh, Amir 145, 146
Saleh, Sultan 126, 193
Salif 59
salt trade 140
sambooks 16, 65, 123, 177, 187

Sana 111, 119
saqqayyah 104
Saud, King Abdul Aziz ibn 115
Saudi Arabia 42, 115, 158, 160
Saut el Arab 118
Schlatholts Bridge 84
scorpions 125
Scott, Hugh 55
Seager, Major Basil 50, 123
Settlement Board, Aden 29
Shabwa 113, 114, 147, 148
Shackleton bombers 93, 94
Shafai 111
Shaful bin Ali, Amir of Dhala 51, 52
Shaib 71
Shairi 49, 51
Shamsan, Jebel 13, 14
shark 66, 80
Sharkey, Captain 28
sharkfin 17
Sharora 115
Sheba 26, 27, 147
Queen of 21, 26
Shell Oil Company 175
Shem, son of Noah 26
Shiah 110
Shibam 70, 100, 101, 103, 107
Shihr 17
Shubaili, Mr. 179, 186-187
Shuqra 121-125, 192
Singapore 71, 101, 105
Sketches of Aden 171
Slave Island 16
slaves 102
snakes 125
Socotra 71
Solomon 26
Somalia 14, 146, 153

Somalis in Aden 22
Stark, Freya 49, 50, 72, 74
Starling, Amethyst 40
State of Emergency 117, 156, 158
Steamer Point 13-16
Stewart, General 37
storks 84, 92
Storrs, Sir Ronald 37
Subeihi 40, 180, 194
Sudan 80
Suez 9, 19, 117
Suleimani 46
Sunni 65, 110
Supreme Council 157

Taiz 111, 115
tamarisks 80, 126
Tanks, the 14, 21, 194
Tarim 70, 101, 104, 105
Teheran 9
Tennyson 55
terrorism 10, 151, 156, 158, 160, 176
Thirra Pass 126-128, 192
Thousand and One Nights 79
Thumeir 46, 48
Time magazine 172, 174
Timna 146-148, 194
tombs, of holy men 102, 126
Tory Government 159
tourists 14, 15
tractors, in Abyan 76
trade (*see also* commerce) 153
trade unions 31, 153-155, 160
Traditions of the Prophet (*haditha*) 61
treaties 51, 69, 75, 78, 111, 112
Treaty of Lausanne 64
Treffry, David 92
Tribal Guards 81, 83

tribal structure 72
tribes, *see under* individual tribe
Tropic Temper 173
tube-wells 73
Tunis 33
turbans 39, 52, 82
Turks .. 18, 28, 32, 36-38, 50, 64, 88, 109, 110, 111, 188
Tyre 26

Union Club 166-168
United Arab States 117, 118
United National Party 155
United Nations 38
United States of America 157
Uz 26

vegetable production 73
vegetation 172
Vespa orientalis 55
Victoria, Queen 14, 19
Volage, H. M. Steamer 19

Wadi Bana 80, 84, 85
Beihan 139, 141
Duan 97-99, 193
Hardaba 48
Hassan 80, 84, 91
Tiban 45
Yeshbum 133, 137
Wahidi 27, 125, 147, 148
water 72, 82, 85, 184
West Road, to Hadhramaut 193
Western Aden Protectorate 18, 45, 50, 127, 152
White Paper (Cmd. 2414), *see also* Federation 159
Wilson, Captain, consul at Mokha 185
Wilson Government 159
women, Arab 23

Yafai 192, 194
al Haid 92
highlands 124
Lower 77, 81, 85, 86, 88, 192
Upper 51, 94, 114, 152
Yahya, Imam 110, 111
Yemen: unseen presence 14; coffee 17; Mohammed Ali's campaign 18; Persian invasion 21; Abyssinian invasion 27; Turkish rule 28, 32; Turkish advance in 1915 36; frontier 46; defeated by Quteibi 48; relations with Dhala 51, 52; *qat* grown 54; coast from Kamaran 59; attitude to Kamaran 65; history and political background 109-119; revolution of 1962 119, 151, 153, 156; border war at Mukeiras 128; relations with Beihan 141; trade links with Aden 153; Egyptian intervention 158; coast from Perim 181
Yemeni, Free, political movement 115
labourers 153, 155-156
Yemenis in Aden 15, 22, 31, 153, 155, 156, 158
Yeramis 92, 194
Yeshbum 124, 132, 133, 137, 142

Zanzibar 16
Zara 126
Zeidi 65, 110, 111, 116, 118
Zingibar 79-84, 125